

NO WOODEN OVERCOAT

John Paddy Carstairs, already famous as a writer and artist in other fields, made a remarkably successful debut as a thriller writer with Gardenias Bruise Easily. This new thriller once more features Garway Trenton, the best-selling novelist and former Fleet Air Arm pilot.

A chance 'phone call from an office in the City has him zooming through Spain in his Aston Martin to the intriguing, cosmopolitan town of Tangier. There, on the vice-ridden coast of North Africa, he finds all the excitement he craves for--and more! More too in the shape of the seemingly tough, hard-boiled American cabaret singer, Fern La Vaine, and, in contrast, the beautiful English rose, elegant Clare Cuffley-Evans.

Piracy, smuggling, mayhem, sizzling action, romance Trenton takes them all in his stride, as the treacherous local wind blows hot then cold, and adventure swiftly follows adventure.

Books by John Paddy Carstairs

CONFIRMATORY NOVELS

Hope Comes on the South Wind

Exultation of Stylarks

Call No Man Faithful

Linsell and Stars

Joe and Ella Kafferty

No Music in the Nightingale

Rain on Her Face

Kimmie

Magical was the Moment

Nothing Happens Mondays

Down the Wide Stream

HIGH NOVELS

Solid! Said the Earl

What Ho She Bumps!

Gnomes in the Culbage Patch

Not to Stylark!

Crimed Pineapple

Veneer and Fiction Paper

But Wishes Aren't Horses

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My Lady H is Wines

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Brunch the Life Story of Nelson Keys

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Honest Injun!

Hadn't We the Gaiter?

Kaleidoscope and a Jar of Liced Eye

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More Merry Go Round

SATIRE

Sunshine and Champagne

Uncle Fangle

A CHILDREN'S BOOK

Lollipop Wood

THRILLERS

Gardemas Bruise Easily

No Wooden Overcoat

ART BOOK

Watercolour is Fun

No Wooden Overcoat

JOHN PADDY CARSTAIRS



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CHAPTER ONE

"TRENTON, you bore me and I'm going to kill you," he said, raising the gun.

"Now look, I . . ." I was alone, unarmed in the motor-boat --alone without any help forthcoming, facing this killer.

"I'm going to kill you, but I think I'd like to see you squirm a little first."

"Now listen . . ."

"No, I'm not going to listen. I'm going to shoot --so move, Trenton, start jumping about, I think I'll wing you a little first--just to make you squirm." He raised the gun as, in a panic, I made for the side of the motor boat, then, as I did so, he fired . . .

I awoke screaming and lay back exhausted against the pillow. I had been dreaming I was back in the South of France and re-living the end of my "holiday" there! Well, thank goodness *that* was over. Though, I mused, as I relaxed after my nightmare, it had been fun at the time.* I'd been back in London some weeks now and my life had followed its usual pattern. I would write after breakfast until lunch time, then taxi to Hyde Park and totter like an octogenarian up to the Serpentine --stopping for a coffee at the park café. I would lunch at the *Caprice* with some delectable companion such as Evadne Monturon, or meet a congenial chum, such as Ginger Bier, at the Goat, the exclusive Naval Club in Bond Street.

I had not seen so much of Tracey Mendip (whom you may have met in my chronicle of our adventure in the South). To be quite honest, I had seen her a few times on our return, but Tracey had got the acting bug, and that's all right when it's done in an amateur way, but once the world looks on it can be embarrassing. What had severed our friendship, at any rate temporarily, was Tracey's insistence that she join

* Described more fully in *Gardenias Bruise Easily*.

one of those T.V. question games. For Tracey not the financial gain but the chance of thespian promoting her film fame was the spur, a producer or two might be watching. Unhappily, I was persuaded to take Tracey along. The sixty-dollar question—an easy one—was “Who was the First Man?” Tracey distinguished herself all right. She said she wouldn’t answer that for *anything*!

There was another reason I stopped seeing Tracey; this was because she decided that for part of the actress build-up she needed a poodle.

Now I am an animal lover in a big way, and those pipe-cleaner type dogs are delightful—but I do not like, when out shopping, looking a right Charley holding one of these pets while milady wants to finger a piece of material or prod a peach. And let me tell you, women with dogs are inevitably late for appointments. To-To had to go walkie-walkies or Frou-Frou had got lost running after another doggie—and now Mitzi wants to be carried. . . . You can see men in restaurants alone and with a starved expression . . . they are playing the waiting game . . . agitated, humiliated, ill-at-ease, they are the victims of the lap-dog brigade. I wanted no part of that.

And so, since I had lost-out on the *éclatante* Vanina da Gama,* and Tracey had filled her head with grease-paint, I had taken up with Charity Stockton.

In the afternoon I played squash, swam at the R.A.C. or attended a *matinée*. One drink at the *Ritz Rivoli* bar and a quiet dinner or an evening in front of that damned T.V. set.

It had been Charity’s idea that I should buy one during my convalescence and, because I hoped that she would come and look in with me, I fell for it. She did look in, when it was first installed, and sat sofa-wise holding my hand as puerility followed puerility. So this is where my reading public had gone! Sitting with eyes glued to the magic little Cyclopean box with cautionings about bad breath and commands to buy Z.I.P. Petrol. Z.I.P. Petrol had IK3 and “IK3 gives you that extra push”. And, of course, Bloo toothpaste—“Ask for Bloo,

* *Gardenias Bruise Easily.*

it's good for you—the only toothpaste with Mardak. Mardak gives one baby-sweet breath." Anti-B.O. "In one hundred tests at our laboratories people using Laviglo did not have B.O." Not to mention Fran. "Fran washes clothes so perfectly it drives other people who don't use it Fran-tic!" "Bubol—the *new* motor oil—sings as it swings motorists to new heights! If you look at this chart, tests show . . ." And so on and so forth.

Charity was my current amou-not-so-propre. She was one of the new class that had sprung up in England—the new poor, the society girl who had to work for the odd crust. Charity found her job quite fun. (Where, oh where, would the new poor be without the word "fun"?) She worked in the soda fountain department at Fontenham's in Bond Street. London had, at last, got used to a soda fountain in Bond Street. When it was first mooted by that august and ancient store, due to the enterprise and vision of its Canadian managing director, London and the satellites of Cheltenham, Ascot, Newbury and Bray whose Quality "came up" to shop at Fontenham's, the rumour "got round" that Fontenham's would close in a year. The very idea of coca-cola being served in Fontenham's! But in no time the quality was ordering malted milks, banana splits and chocolate nut sundaes. Fontenham's had been smart; tootsies did not serve you at Fontenham's but young ladies did. Among them Charity.

Charity Stockton was a beauty. About the only thing I had against her was her refusal to live with me. Of course, I knew that my persistence was a mistake; women go for the lads who feign indifference, *sans doute* of course. Being a novelist by profession, I knew that; yet, how few of us are able to benefit by our knowledge?

I sighed, blowing out my breath like a broadside, as if I were sinking all T.V. advertising. Below, I could hear Lily Mertens, my daily, as she let herself into my Westminster maisonette.

Lily Mertens was not the 'old style' char. She was young and attractive and—thanks to the movies—she made the best of herself. Lily had a husband who worked, and a young

son she idolised. Mrs. Mertens chared to help pay for the 'fridge, the T.V. set and the car. Oh yes, and, of course, the holiday in Brussels. In this changing world the chars of today had more than their masters, less responsibility and—more power to their elbows.

Lily brought the breakfast up on a tray together with the morning papers. I was in the habit of leaving her a note telling her what I "fancied", to use her word, in the mornings; sometimes it was a continental style breakfast and sometimes the English variety—"The lot" to quote Lily once more. Lily and her cronies had a number of expressions I enjoyed. She was for ever saying about the weather that it was 'Real' and when she had cleaned the bath and washed up she would 'poodle off', though in fact, she moved more like a space satellite than a lap dog.

This morning I realised that I had omitted to leave Lily a note saying what I'd like for breakfast.

"Morning Lily. I say, I forgot to leave you a note."

"Yes. I used my loaf," Lily replied.

"Oh it's hot toast, Lily!" I gagged, but Lily didn't get it.

"I took a chance," she said, putting down the tray and opening the curtains.

"Not Snuggies, I couldn't bear Snuggies," I said. Then imitating the pluinestone voice of the T.V. announcer I said, in stentorian tones: "Snuggies for breakfast. The better-than-perfect breakfast cereal. The only cereal with Barleygloo in it. Snuggie gives you extra zing. Two hundred scientists have proved that the Snuggie breakfasts are twice as nourishing, why? It's the added Barleygloo, of course!"

"'Ave you done?" Lily asked as she put the tray with a kipper as my main dish in front of me.

"Good old Lily!"

"Snuggies indeed! I wouldn't give my boy just Snuggies let alone a grown man."

"That's right, Lily, you let alone a grown man."

"You are playful today," Lily retorted, picking up a sock from the carpet and placing it neatly on a chair.

"No—not playful. Glad to be awake, that's all. I had an awful dream."

"Did you now!"

Thinking about the dream set me off again. In my T.V. voice I boomed out :

"Do you dream? For pleasant relaxing sleep take Sleep-aflow, Sleepaflow, the perfect bedtime beverage . . ."

"Turn it up!" Lily said succinctly. "And eat your kipper while it's hot."

I did justice to Lily's cooking and then I lit a cigarette—the first puff of the first cigarette of the day, preferably in bed, is heaven— and dam' the fact that it might be doing me harm. I was just beginning to feel fine again. My wound from the nasty gent in the motor boat had now healed and I had convalesced long enough. I was anxious to write again, but I lacked inspiration. It still gave me the gyp when I changed gear on Ming II—my super-leggera Spyder—and, of course, I wasn't really allowed to drive, nevertheless, I needed action.

My main source of income (apart from the royalties of previous publications) was the newspaper series I had just completed on my recent experiences in the South of France. But to tell you the truth my spot of excitement there had made me bored now. I longed for something exciting to happen. I wanted the telephone to ring. . . . Then, suddenly, stridently, the telephone bell *did* ring.

CHAPTER TWO

A VOICE said :

"Mr. Garway Trenton?"

I countered with : "Who is that, please?"

"Who is that?" Sometimes on the telephone it was a good thing to be one's own butler. It could be one might want to be 'out'.

"This is a Mr. Shadrack," replied the voice.

"Abed-nego here," I retorted. In the ensuing silence I gathered that Mr. Shadrack was not amused. Finally :

"Is that Mr. Trenton speaking?"

"Apart from the biblical association, I don't recall meeting you, Mr. Shadrack?"

"I end my name with a k not an h," he said.

Mr. Shadrack wasn't lacking a sense of humour.

"What is the nature of this call please, Mr. Shadrack?"

"I take it you *are* Mr. Trenton?"

"Yes."

"I would very much like to see you." Mr. Shadrack said.

"Oh?"

"It could be to your advantage."

"Are you by chance a solicitor? It sounds as if some maiden aunt had left me a fortune. Not," I added, "that I have a maiden aunt, at least, I don't think I have."

"I am not a solicitor Mr. Trenton. But I believe you would find a visit to my chambers not unrewarding."

I was naturally intrigued. Was this telephone call the prelude to a spot of excitement? I was in the mood for excitement; my experiences on the Côte d'Azur the previous summer had started an upsurge in the jolly old adrenalin glands.

"A barrister perhaps? Do I come to Lincoln's Inn?"

Mr. Shadrack did not disclose his trade.

"Not Lincoln's Inn. My address is 3, Little Churchgate Street, in the City, near Fenchurch Street Station," Mr.

Shadrack imparted. I wondered, as I waited for further information, why someone in the City would want to see me. "Do you think you could find time to visit me today?" Mr. Shadrack enquired.

"Yes, today would be convenient," I replied.

"About two o'clock?"

"Three-thirty would be preferable," I countered. I was lunching Evadne Monturon at *Helen Cordet's* and, in addition to a walk through Green Park, I was looking forward to it. Mr. Shadrack's business could wait a while.

"Very well, Mr. Trenton. Indian or china tea?"

Mr. Shadrack was certainly of the Old School.

"I would be delighted to partake of a cup of china tea with you at three-thirty, Mr. Shadrack," I said.

"Good-day to you, sir," Mr. Shadrack replied courteously.

I knew Evadne would be late for lunch. She liked to make an entrance, but she was very late and I was not in a good mood when I dropped her at Simpsons (she wanted some sports clothes for her summer holiday), and taxied on to the City. Gone, one could say alas! were the veritable aged Jehus who once drove London taxi-cabs—relegated to the pages of old copies of *Punch*, they no longer searched voluminous garments for non-existent change; these knowledgeable oldsters had been replaced by slick young spivs of the new C.C.L. brigade—the Couldn't Care Less types that abounded. Mo—I think he was a Mo or certainly an Ed—Mo had never heard of Churchgate Street. He only just knew of Fenchurch Street, though, in truth, if one had ever been there it was the sort of station one tried to eradicate from one's mind. We spent a lot of time enquiring the way of taciturn cityites. I always thought taxi drivers had to take a geographical test. If so, in his case, Mo's uncle must have been the examiner.

I was therefore late and even more ill-tempered when I finally reached 3, Little Churchgate Street, a quaint cul-de-sac wherein I would not have been surprised if Sam Weller, top hat askew and in fine fettle, had appeared, winking.

Mr. Shadrack proved to be no Sam Weller though there was something very Dickensian about the fusty office premises. A sad-faced, adenoidal-voiced, elderly secretary in the outer office had the kettle boiling on a ring in the grate awaiting my arrival. A seedy little clerk, nose buried in a vast ledger, peered over his spectacles at me from a corner and bizarrely enough, a canary chirped sprightly from a cage near the window.

"My name—" I began.

But the Secretary cut me short.

"You are late," she sniffed, indicating that I was to follow.

We went into a room not unlike the outer office, dusty and crammed with books. At an old, and in its day, magnificent mahogany desk sat Mr. Shadrack. Tall, lugubrious, bald, wearing a black coat, striped trousers and the old-fashioned butterfly collar with a black bow tie with polka dots. He extended a limp hand and gave me a sixth-carbon-copy smile.

"Forgive me," he said, "for not rising."

I noticed that there were crutches by his chair. I was intrigued to know how Mr. Shadrack had lost his legs.

As if always in the habit of answering the unasked, Mr. Shadrack explained :

"Bomb injury, last war."

Mr. Shadrack, even allowing for the years between, did not look the military type.

Mr. Shadrack once more offered up the information I was mentally seeking.

"Not the D.S.O. exactly. Sitting in the privy at the time. Ironic, you might say."

I nodded.

Miss Orsey brought in the tea and poured.

"No milk, thank you," I said.

Mr. Shadrack appeared pleased. He was further gratified when I sniffed into the delicate cup I was handed and said appreciatively "Lapsang Souchong."

"You are a connoisseur?"

"Well, I'm not un-genned up on these matters," I said.

"Fortnum's send me the odd quarter, every now and then."

We sipped our tea in silence for a moment, a silence broken only by Mr. Shadrack munching a ginger biscuit which I had refused; *Cordet's* lunch made further food impossible for some hours. Finally :

"Mr. Trenton, are you willing to proceed abroad at this time?"

"That depends," I countered, "on a number of things."

Mr. Shadrack smiled wryly.

"Destination Morocco," he said.

CHAPTER THREE

I SMILED at Mr. Shadrack, took out my cigarette case and offered him a King Size which he refused. He indicated an old-fashioned but expensive-looking cigar box on the desk.

"Would you prefer a cigar?" He invited.

"Too early in the day, sir, thank you," I said. The outer office would have been puzzled at my 'sir'. This was not subservience. Not necessarily only a tribute to an elder. It was something Eton taught us, I suppose, and, anyway his butterfly collar was held together by a near-gangrenous stud and an O.E. tie.

"Morocco?" I repeated, questioningly.

"Yes. Morocco."

"Very hot in Morocco," I said, sounding a little like a character out of an early Coward play—was it *Private Lives*?

"Yes," was Mr. Shadrack's cryptic reply. "You'll need a visa, but they'll fix that in Madrid."

"Madrid?"

"You will have to go to Madrid for your instructions and, of course, some money. Moroccan or Spanish pesetas; perhaps some of each."

"Good," I said. "I've already spent my £100 allowance."

Mr. Shadrack was not amused. He merely retorted, "We would not expect you to use your own currency in this matter."

"We?"

"The people I represent," Mr. Shadrack replied smoothly.

"I haven't agreed to go yet," I told him, but already I was intrigued.

Mr. Shadrack smiled a watery kind of smile.

"No, no. And so far I've told you precious little. But when I tell you the mission is not without danger, I am told you will be interested."

"Told? Told by whom?" I enquired.

"Otto von Schneider."

"Otto von Schneider?" I repeated in amused astonishment. "Not my old chum from Interpol?"

"Precisely. I understand you met—er—professionally last summer in the South of France."

"Yes, semi-professionally. Otto has a wonderful wife."

"So I believe," Mr. Shadrack replied drily. I wondered how much he knew about my adventure.

"Interpol are very anxious to round-up a big combine trafficking in drugs. It is powerful, unscrupulous. The members are wicked men. Herr von Schneider is afraid that their counter-espionage now know too much about his personnel. He felt a new face might . . ."

"Then why not one of our own secret service agents?"

Mr. Shadrack frowned as if to say that he knew of none. Instead, he said :

"Herr von Schneider thought that someone completely outside any organisation at all might—er—fox—is that the word?—fox the—ah—enemy."

"A good point. So he thought of his old amateur Shamus Trenton, eh?"

"Amateur Shamus?" This clearly 'foxed' Mr. Shadrack.

"So what you want me to do," I said, summing it up for Mr. Shadrack, "is to report to Otto von Schneider in Morocco and to try and get a lead on this drug running mob. Is that it?"

"Precisely." Mr. Shadrack concurred. "but one tiny point. I doubt very much if you'll see Herr von Schneider."

"No that was foolish of me, obviously if I'm going as an amateur sleuth I'll have no contacts with Interpol, except of the remotest kind."

"That is so." Mr. Shadrack nodded thoughtfully.

"Now, you'll need a 'plane ticket to Madrid and —"

I cut in on Mr. Shadrack and said :

"Plane? I'd rather take my car. I don't expect I'll be operating only in Tangier and, too, I'll look far more like a nice, innocent tourist if I stooze up in an Aston."

Mr. Shadrack considered this for a moment, then said :

"Very well. But please don't dawdle."

The idea of the Aston dawdling amused me.

"I won't," I promised, with a grin.

"You'll arrange about the car ferry, and so on?"

"I'll call in at the R.A.C. as soon as I've left you."

"Capital! I think that's all, and I'll forward the necessary documents by hand tomorrow," Mr. Shadrack said.

"Not quite all. What happens when I get to Madrid?"

"Oh yes. How silly of me!" Mr. Shadrack apologised.

"Contact a Monsieur Grand at the *Dersa-Palace* when you get there."

I got up to leave.

"One final request, Mr. Shadrack," I said. "I'd like to take Horace with me."

Mr. Shadrack looked surprised. "And who pray is Horace?"

I smiled. "Not---as you may have thought---a stepson. Horace is a revolver."

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Mr. Shadrack---was it in mock horror? "I don't see how. . . ."

"I meant, would you be able to arrange with H.M. Customs . . . ?" I began, but Mr. Shadrack promptly interrupted me.

"I really must remind you, Mr. Trenton, that you go on this mission completely on your own. By this I mean we cannot vouch for you or support you. We know nothing about you."

"That's ducky-wucky!" I retorted.

"However," added Mr. Shadrack---getting up and taking his crutches and escorting me to the door. "No doubt Monsieur Grand in Madrid will attend to any little---er---comfort you may require."

I liked the word comfort and I smiled at Mr. Shadrack.

"One final question, Mr. Shadrack," I said. "Were you a member of Pop?"

If I thought I was going to catch Mr. Shadrack off guard I was wrong. He looked at me for a few seconds before he replied: "Do I look as if I ever wore a brocaded waistcoat?"

"*Touché*," I admitted. I was just checking up to see if Mr. Shadrack was entitled to that Old Etonian tie. "Thank you for the tea, Mr. Shadrack."

"Good afternoon and—er—good luck, Mr. Trenton!" he replied courteously.

In the outer office the clerk peered once more at me over the top of his spectacles and the sniffy secretary sniffed an "Afternoon."

I walked to the nearest 'phone box, which was just outside Fenchurch Street Station, and I telephoned Ginger Bier who worked in a rich broker's office nearby.

"Hi sport!" I said. "Can you take a couple of weeks off to come to Morocco?" I enquired.

"Be your age, Catesby!" Ginger said. We were old mess-mates from the Indom. and I trusted Ginger implicitly.

"I've just come back from a mad twirl in St. Tropez," Ginger continued. "I'll be lucky if I get Christmas Day off now."

"Pity," I said.

I noticed that a disengaged taxi had cruised up and parked alongside the 'phone box and, as I talked, the driver refused a fare to the would-be passenger's irritation.

I then proceeded to tell Ginger of what I was up to—just in case I didn't return. I gave myself four weeks. Ginger was very intrigued.

"Bash me over the head with a Nux bar!" he explained. "Man! I'd like to be with you!"

"Well, if you don't hear these dulcet tones in a month, contact Otto von Schneider, somewhere in Tangier!" I requested.

"I certainly will, cobber!" Ginger replied, then added brightly: "Tangier? Well! Well! You can do something for me when you get there."

"In Tangier?" I said, in surprise.

"Yep. Call in at the *Juany*—it's a night club—"

"And settle a bill you owe them, I suppose?" I interrupted him.

"Wrong again, Catesby, wrong again. You wound your

old messmate. And me about to do you a bit of good, too!"

"Oh yeah?" I retorted disbelievingly.

"You disbelieving — — !"

"Never mind that now. What is it, a paternity order?"

"Why, you — — !"

"Oh get on with it, Ginger! What's the beef?"

"No beef. In fact, the thing to eat there is a cous-cous. Very tasty, but no tastier than Fern La Verne."

"And who is Fern La Verne?"

"Now the old ears prick up, eh? If she's still at the *Juany*, Fern La Verne is a humdinger. At first you'll find her a wee bit stand-offish and she'll shoot you down in flames, old boy, if you try any monkey business. She's tough but —"

"Hell of a fine date you've fixed me! 'Do look up Fern La Verne at the *Juany*', you say, 'she's tough, stand-offish and if you make a pass at her she'—"

"I know! I know!" Ginger interjected. "Nevertheless you'll like her, I can promise you."

"When in hell did you meet her?"

"I keep telling you at the *Juany*."

"Yes, but what in hades were you doing at the *Juany* in Tangier?" I enquired. I could hear Ginger chuckle at the other end of the line.

"Do I have to account to you for everything?" he asked me.

"I guess not! Don't forget if I'm lost you get time off from those Simon Legrees you work for and come and find me, chum!"

"Will do!"

"O.K. then, ding-ho, Ginger!"

"Ding-ho, Gar'!"

I came out of the 'phone box and was surprised to find the driver of the vacant taxi was prepared to take me anywhere I wanted to go. I refused him, deciding to walk through to Tower Hill Station and get a district train along to Westminster, partly because I liked walking, and partly because I loved looking at the Tower of London. This was one of my few sentimentalities.



It wasn't until I was sitting in the tube at Charing Cross station that I was suddenly aware that the driver of the taxi had a strangely foreign look. Almost Arabian. I wondered if my imagination had begun to take over. There must be plenty of foreign-looking taxi drivers, especially from the East End of London and the Commercial Docks area. Yet he had refused a fare whilst I was telephoning and he had wanted to give me a lift. And, there was no doubt about it, he *had* looked foreign.

CHAPTER FOUR

A JOURNEY of a Thousand Miles—the Chinese say—begins with a single step. And so I stepped—out of my flat into Ming II, my Aston Martin, assuring Mrs. Lily Mertens that she would be given plenty of warning in regard to my return. Mrs. Mertens liked to sip the brandy—purely medicinally, of course; and I made for the coast.

From Lydd by *Silver City Airways* over to Le Touquet and on to Paris, then very smartly down the N.7. In some ways it was a pity to be alone and yet, of course, one travelled fastest alone. Was this perhaps the reason that I was still a bachelor? Certainly few women would have enjoyed getting up at the crack of dawn and zooming very fast southwards.

At Avignon I turned off for Nîmes, Perpignan and into the province of Gerona. Then began the long, hot trek to Madrid. I had promised Mr. Shadrack I would waste no time. I kept my word. I merely pressed my foot down on the accelerator and Ming II responded. Soon I was over the mountain group and riding along the fine, broad road into Madrid, occasionally in moments of elation singing to myself in stentorian tones *You'll be a little lovelier each day with fabulous Pink Camay*. I had hoped to stay at the *Fenix* in Madrid, a hotel I liked, but my bosses had fixed me a reservation at the quite fabulous and utterly vulgar Argentinian-controlled *Densa-Palace*.

Another preference for the *Fenix* was a theory I had learned from past experience, that it is often a good thing when meeting strangers not to meet them on one's own doorstep. One never quite knew what to expect.

Certainly my assignation in Madrid proved to be a bizarre one.

Monsieur Grand turned out to be a quiet, little, unassuming French or Belgian with shrewd eyes, often half-closed and Signor Polti, a very large, bearded Italian of inassive propor-

tions. But the most interesting member of the triumvirate was Prince Ras-el-Ras. An elegant young man, very black and very proud. He was one of the sons of one of the Sultans, I think. I was not genned-up on rank and as to whether he had a right to his title I didn't know and didn't madly care. He spoke French. In fact, the only way we could talk was through the medium of the French tongue. We drank Cuba Libre—rum and coca-cola—much nicer with Bacardi rum, by the way—and the Prince handed me a fat manilla envelope.

"The 'toots'?" I enquired. " 'Mazuma'?"

For a moment my accomplices looked uncomprehendingly at me, then Signor Polti caught on.

"Ah! The Grisbie! Oui! Oui! Sans doute."

We all smiled politely. Monsieur Grand's half-closed eyes took a quick tour round the vast and ornate lounge. But I did not think we had been overheard. Most of the people present were watching the antics of an American movie star whose performances off the set were even hammier than those on.

Now with a flashing smile the Prince produced a large box of chocolates. The ribbon surrounding it was unbroken and the box was covered with virgin cellophane.

"Eat them later," the Prince said.

I was not that dumb. I said, trying to translate it into French, "Oh goody. Call me early Mother for today I'm to be Queen of the May." After a while I gave up trying to translate this, and instead, ordered more Cuba-Libres. I nearly broke my wrist taking up that box of chocolates.

"Your passport?" I produced it for them.

"Just one moment," said the large Italian. "A pure formality, you understand, but have you any other means of identification?"

"Well, I believe there's a mole on the left cheek of—"

Little Mr. Grand cut in:

"You joke too much, Mr. Trenton."

Suddenly the air-conditioned *Dersa-Palace* was very icy.

"Sorry," I apologised. "You're right, of course." I pro-

duced my international driving licence, a letter from Mr. Shadrack written on his Little Churchgate Street stationery and my Flimsy from the F.A.A. on discharge. It was highly complimentary—as, indeed, whose were not?

These documents were gravely studied by the trio. I think the Prince was reading the letter from Mr Shadrack upside down but I did not think this was quite the time to mention it : these boyos had had quite enough of my facetiousness. At any rate, the papers seemed to suffice. Nods were exchanged.

“Your visa for Morocco will be ready tomorrow,” little Monsieur Grand pronounced. “Come with me, we will fill in this form in triplicate.”

We went into one of the hotel offices and dictated my replies to an efficient secretary. When the small job was completed Monsieur Grand bowed.

“Until tomorrow,” he said, retaining the papers and my passport.

I had always felt as if I were bathing naked in one of Selfridge's front windows when they took my passport away when abroad, but there seemed nothing I could do about this. I went up to my large, flashy bedroom, locked the door, drew the curtains and opened the manilla envelope. A fat wad of pesetas fell out. I then ripped the cellophane off the chocolate box, removed the gay lid and smiled at the innocent row of tempting chocolates. I murmured to myself : “Ho hum !”

I looked across at the bed. One of the maids had provocatively placed my mascot, Ginsberg, my beribboned golliwog, under the coverlet so that only his head showed. I winked at Ginsberg (who accompanied me everywhere and wore my war medals. Had he not been in the cockpit with me in many theatres of war including the Korean campaign?) I said aloud to Ginsberg :

“I bet these chocolates have hard centres !”

I turned the box upside down onto the bed. A neat 4.6 Mauser revolver dropped onto the coverlet. With it was a clip of a dozen rounds. I grinned appreciatively. Certainly this would come in handy. It also looked as if my employers

expected me to have a spot of bother on my hands. I wondered how I was going to get it out of Spain. I'd look a proper Charley waltzing into Gibraltar with a fancy box of chocs—I'd have the local troops whooping at me!

I now felt hungry and decided it was time for chow. But what to do with the revolver? It wasn't something you could ask the management to look after. I decided to take it with me.

I hailed the gaily-bedecked Commissionaire outside the ornate *Dersa-Palace* to get me a taxi, only to be the recipient of a stream of expletives—unfriendly in the extreme—how was I to know the fellow was a United States Marine? He was clothed even more magnificently than the hotel porter. I told the driver to take me to the Barcelona, a pleasant restaurant off the main drag where I knew I could get fried calamares—octopus to the hoi-polloi. I washed it down with a light beer. My hotel was some distance, quite near the fabulous *Hilton Castellana*, and I decided to walk back. This, I thought, would give anyone a chance to search my room in comfort. I was accommodating in some ways. But if my room had been selected, it had been done so carefully I could not detect it.

The *Dersa-Palace* had been designed in the shape of a square. The bedrooms all faced inwards, over-looking one another, the theory I imagine being that this kept out the noise from the streets. This may have been so, but it also had the effect of retaining any noise and cooking smells coming from within. It so happened that there was a Spanish wedding breakfast of a hundred guests and the smell of frying and the noise of the flamenco music made sleep impossible for me until the early hours of the morning.

Perhaps, too, I was over-tired or maybe excited at the possibilities of some fun and games to come.

I read for a time. My kind of escapist reading were books on Elizabethan history or entomology, such as *The Hunting Wasps* by Crompton. I was in the throes of (perhaps thoroughly enveloped in would be better phrasing) Crompton's *Life of the Spider* and, wondering if I, too, were some

poor fly about to be ensnared in some Machiavellian web and sucked dry, when, finally, I fell into a deep and troubled sleep which was disturbed by the arrival of coffee I hadn't ordered. Later, I ordered bacon and eggs assuming that, since the hotel numbered so many American tycoons on its list of residents, these would be delicious, only to find them cold and insufficiently cooked.

I clucked and said to Ginsberg the golliwog :

"I never learn. The only places in the world to have bacon and eggs are America and Britain !"

If Ginsberg murmured "And, of course, Abyssinia !" I didn't hear him.

And why was it abroad just as you were about to enjoy your first mouthful of bricker, inevitably Baron Von Hoickitup was always next door?

True to his word, shifty-eyed Monsieur Grand arrived very early with my passport duly visa-ed. He said that the Prince sent his apologies and would I excuse him? He and Signor Polti had had a late night. They had been guests at the wedding breakfast.

I said I was sorry I hadn't seen the Prince dancing a gay fandango. And, once again, little Monsieur Grand was not amused. He said "The Prince never dances in public."

I speculated upon what kind of dance the Prince did in private, but decided not to pursue it, instead I asked little Monsieur Grand about a permit for my newly-acquired Mauser.

Monsieur Grand looked suitably horrified.

"What revolver?" He countered.

"O.K. if that's the way you want it played," I said in English. Monsieur Grand shrugged his shoulders.

"Je ne comprend pas," he said.

I smiled with as much warmth as an ice cube. For me little Monsieur Grand had rapidly lost his charm. For two waggles of a duck's *derrière*, I would pack the trip in; but there wasn't a duck in sight, though the lobby was at that time, aglow with *derrières*, some rather splendid. This was something I could appreciate, being a fervent Aristotle man.

Monsieur Grand, as if giving me my *congé*, told me that my hotel bill would be settled for me, and I rather regretted not having had a few Corona-Coronas on his slate the previous evening.

I never liked other people driving the Aston and so I went myself round to the hotel garage and, making sure that I was unobserved, I unlocked the Aston petrol intake. There was just room in this little compartment for my revolver. It was not an ideal hiding place but sometimes the obvious pays off.

I drove round to the front of the *Dersa-Palace* to collect my bags, tipped the porter handsomely, the theory being that I might come back that way, and made off for the South. Of Monsieur Grand, Signor Polti and the Prince Ras-el-Ras there was no sign.

CHAPTER FIVE

Earlier I had said that one travels faster alone but as I drove towards Granada, I felt the need for company, preferably female. I guess, these days, I am old-fashioned. I passed some of the tedious journey thinking of the women I had loved, the women I had lost and the women who had flung out the grappling irons and willy-nilly attached themselves to me. Among the latter I had, of course, to number Madeline, the enchanting young French art student who was now studying at the Slade. It was a pity Madeline was not a few years older and her parents, say, in Alaska. But, there it was, Madeline was too young and guarded, even if her parents were in Var, by French standards of family and behaviour more invincible than any mediaeval chastity belt. *Floreat Etona* and all that.

That I was worried about getting the revolver past the Customs I will concede but if I failed, and provided I wasn't slung into the Bastille, I would insist—official standing or no—that some sort of equaliser, or even a piece of cutlery, be issued to me once I was in Tangier.

At Gib I had a stroke of good fortune. At first the youthful Customs officer obviously resented Ming II. He positively sneered at it and me, of course. Requesting my passport, he read my name and a complete change of expression came over his face.

"Not *the* Garway Trenton?" He enquired. Like anyone who writes—and I agree this is a sweeping generalisation—I was pleased at the recognition.

"Actually, yes."

"Well, stop me!" he exclaimed. "They always say that coincidences are quite unbelievable!"

"Yes?"

"My wife's reading one of yours at this very moment," he said. "Let's see, something about roses, I think. . . ."

People never remembered the title of one's books.

"*Lilac is for Lovers*," I corrected him.

"Yes. That's it. She *will* be interested." By now the officer was paying less attention to the Aston than before though he had reached the petrol intake panel. I seized my opportunity.

"You must let me send her an autographed copy of one of my others," I suggested. He instantly seized on this. I asked him to put the name and address on a piece of paper for me—and I was through the Customs faster than Herb Elliott and his mile.

The journey across the Straits is short and the first view of Tangier delightful. The small white lighthouse of Malabata welcomes you, behind are the hills of Morocco, deep brown and a surprising rich green, dropping to great white gashes of sand. The impression is deceptive; it is of lushness and pleasantness. I had a premonition that it wasn't going to be lush very often.

There were the inevitable noisy British upper classes with Rolls-Bentleys. Why do the aristos have to shout at one another? And the not-so-upper class families with their Hillman and the dad in his minor public school tie. Later, they would be at one of the beach hotels and sharp at seven-thirty they would hurry in voluminous bathrobes from the hotel to the sea for the matitudinal pre-brekker swim. This was *de rigueur*. It proved that one had not become flabby. Inane beach games during the day would follow, also to prove that one had not become flabby. That one was flabby for the other fifty weeks of the year was never taken into account. I wondered if I looked to them as cynical as I sounded? Robbie Burns had a word or two about this.

When we reached the port, the gangway of the ferry boat had hardly been lowered when an Arab in a shabby cotton suite and a dispatch case, giving him the semblance of some authority, hurried over to me.

"Mr. Trenton?" His English had the strange sing-song timbre not unlike the Indians and Pakistanis. I said I was Trenton.

"How do you do, sir!" He continued "Mr Tagore has sent me I am Ali Ben Mahoot"

"Is that a good thing to be?"

Ali seemed in a state of agitation "I was to conduct you through the Customs and all the necessary particulars and informations and so on and so forth," Ali told me, showing off his English "Your papers please, sir"

I handed over the *Carnet* for the Aston and, retaining my passport, proceeded through Customs and Immigration Ali seemed to be anxious to rush me through and this was all right with me Whether Ali had any influence or not I do not know, but it was certain that the Langerine Customs officials were very pleasant I though Ming II was searched fairly thoroughly, there was no officiousness and they only gave my baggage a cursory glance The revolver was safe in the petrol intake compartment Pretty soon I was checking in at the modern Hotel *Opal*, a large airy hotel, French-owned that stood by the vast expanse of the stoneless beach To the left facing seawards was the busy little port and behind it stacked up quaintly house upon house were the flat-roofed white buildings of the cosmopolitan population of this city of contrasts I unpacked my cases and taking the Mauser I hid it then I went down to collect my guide He was drinking mint tea from a glass laded with sugar I made a mental note to try it but not just then Sitting next to him was a group of Americans who had chummed up and were sonorously telling one another of their experiences abroad As a contrast to the mint tea their particular tipple was that American fetish, the far too dry Dry Martini This was the first of many contrasts I was to get in this strange, fabulous land

Ali Ben Mahoot promptly stopped his agitated sips of mint tea when he saw me and hurried towards me, fez in hand

"We are late Mister Horton" he said "Hurry, please!"

It seemed a crime to hurry in that hot sun

Mr Ali had a taxi waiting It was a modern Citroen and something of a surprise to me as I had sort of expected a camel That's langer for you!

We drove to the *Marsala* Hotel. There are about six good hotels in Tangier, the Moorish-style, English-owned *El Minzah*, the *Velasquez*, the *Rif*, the *Rembrandt*, the *Marsala* and the *Opal*, all of them modern. The *Marsala* was the most modern. Ali Ben Mahoot retained the taxi and ushered me into the hotel lobby, air-conditioned and delightful after the heat outside. He did not bother with the reception desk, instead, conducted me to the lifts.

"Penthouse two, Mr. Trenton," he said. He took off his fez and bowed me on my way. A young Arab boy in a crimson bell-hop's uniform grinned and took me up to the top floor of the hotel. Here he indicated that I should turn right. I found Penthouse two and rang the bell. It was one of those trick bells that play a series of chimes, corny but effective.

An Arab servant answered. He, too, bowed low and ushered me into the hall and then into a spacious lounge. Seated reading *The Times* was Mr. Tagore. He got up and extended a hand of welcome.

Mr. Tagore was a fine looking man. Well built, tall and determined. Two things about him worried me—he certainly was not Indian, and he had a cruel mouth. But then, in espionage, I supposed a cruel mouth was useful.

I said: "Your man seemed impatient to get me to you. London said I could bring the car."

"The car?"

"Rather than fly. Am I late?"

"Well, not exactly late, Mr. Trenton, but things are moving fast. I am sure you have arrived at just the right time." He rang a bell and the manservant appeared quietly in a matter of seconds; it was as if he had been on tiptoe awaiting a call.

"A glass of wine, Mr. Trenton? The local *Chaudsoleil* is pleasant," Mr. Tagore said. There was a strange sibilance about his voice. One felt he had deliberately rehearsed its softness, perhaps as a façade. I said I'd like to try the *Chaudsoleil*. Mr. Tagore ordered it in Arabic and then, looking at me penetratingly, he asked:

"Didn't we meet once in Cairo?"

People were always asking me had we not met in Cairo. I wondered what was so special in Cairo.

"I don't think so," I replied.

"Perhaps in wartime?" Mr. Tagore suggested.

I wondered what Mr. Tagore was doing in Cairo in wartime and further, if he referred to our ignominious caper over the Canal when Nasser tweaked our tail so effectively. I said :

"My service was mostly in the Atlantic and Far East, Trinco and so on."

"Ah, yes." Mr. Tagore nodded sagaciously though I wasn't sure he really understood. I wondered about Mr. Tagore. The name was Indian, the face Hawaiian or Tahitian, the hair negroid, the cheekbones Chinese. Mr. Tagore, I felt sure, had quite an antecedence. The *Chaudsoleil* proved to be very palatable. We took it out and drank it on the private terrace of Mr. Tagore's hotel suite. The penthouse overlooked the port. To the right of us was the splendid beach many miles long, near-white, stoneless sand, and with the sea greener than it is most days in the South of France. The beach lacked the chicness of the Côte d'Azur; the French had a way with them when it comes to the right-coloured parasols, the 'get up' of a little café, the gay flags and flowers, that is unsurpassable, but this beach was *quelque chose*, if you just wanted a wonderful beach, period.

Mark you, things were considerably cheaper in Morocco than in France. The Tangerines had not yet acquired the French's savvy of the polite gyp. The Spanish were learning fast but the French—past masters at the depletion of the bank roll with tremendous charm—still topped the poll. The only thing you got free in France was an envelope with your picture postcards—the French were very insistent about this, they always put the tourists' cards in a free envelope. Just one of their idiosyncrasies. In case the postcards were rude, perhaps? Anyway, despite their money-minded ways I'm very fond of them, I must admit.

"You are very thoughtful," Mr. Tagore said.

"I was thinking about the French," I explained.

"And the Spanish, German and Arabian," said Mr. Tagore, thinking I meant the polyglot population of Tangier.

"Quite a beach, quite a sight," I said, indicating the view. I had known many beaches from Malibu in California to Repulse Bay, Hong Kong, thanks to service in H.M. Fleet Air Arm, and this one rated.

"Yes," Mr. Tagore agreed. "That's the *Rif* hotel over on the right, up at the back is the *Velasquez* and the *Casbah*. Since Tangier has ceased to be run internationally it is said to be very prim."

"Your 'it is said' sounded a trifle sarcastic."

"Things still happen, Mr. Trenton. Tangier still lives on its wits. The King of Morocco has made many courageous reforms and a great deal of these have been very effective but—and it is a big but—Tangier is still full of many strange and often sinister occurrences."

"Before or after it was British?" I enquired.

"British?" Mr. Tagore looked surprised.

"It was British about 1680." I imparted this "grif" to an incredulous Mr. Tagore.

"Really?"

I had taken the precaution of genning-up on the place before I had left London.

"Well before the French and Spanish influence," I said.

"A long time ago. In many ways I expect Tangier is much the same, much the same—a fascinating place."

I waited for Mr. Tagore to get down to business. He seemed loath to do so. Casually he asked about London and of Mr. Shadrack's health. He made a joking reference to Mr. Shadrack being wounded in the behind during the blitz. I suppose to be shelled in the W.C. was funny, provided *you* weren't the person ensconced therein.

"We wondered why you got this job, Mr. Trenton," Mr. Tagore said.

"Me, too!" I replied. I was getting a little bored at the chit-chat. I wanted action, particularly as there had been such a hurry to get me to Mr. Tagore.

"Anyway you're the Big Boss, surely you know that."

Mr. Tagore laughed, exposing a number of gold-capped teeth.

"No, alas ! I am not the big boss as you put it, Mr. Trenton. Just—well, just a Number if you like."

"Not Number One Boy?"

"By no means Number One Boy."

"Well then, Number Two?"

"Possibly Number Two," Mr. Tagore replied diffidently.

"O.K. sir. Now about my instructions?"

"It's very simple. When I said many sinister things are happening in Tangier, I should, perhaps, have qualified that. Tangier is well policed these days. But Morocco is a big, sprawling place and outside Tangier . . ." Mr. Tagore paused for a moment, then continued. "We want you to go to Larache," he said. "It's a short way past Tétuan."

"Tétuan's about an hour and a half from here?"

"That is so. Report there at once."

"Shall I take my things?"

"No. No. Leave everything."

"Shall I not take the car?"

"No. Don't take anything. You have your passport?"

"Yes."

"Good, you'll need that to get out of Tangier."

"But who shall I see? Where do I go?"

"My car will take you," said Mr. Tagore. "The driver has full instructions. At Larache you will get your wish and meet Number One."

"Ah!" I said, "that sounds more like it!"

"Good luck!" Mr. Tagore shook me warily by the hand, adding, "you may need it!"

CHAPTER SIX

MR. TAGORE's man conducted me to the car, a large, black Studebaker which was parked near the front entrance. In addition to the Moslem driver there was a second man in the front with him. Mr. Tagore's servant spoke shortly to them in Arabic and raised his hand in a gesture of farewell. We moved off swiftly and it was evident that the boyo at the wheel had had plenty of driving experience.

From the back seat I called out to the man next to him :

"Hey, Buster !" (I figured he had known enough Americans for this term of endearment (?) to catch on.)

He turned and grinned politely.

"Hotel *Opal* !" I said.

"Larache !" he replied.

"Hotel *Opal* first," I retorted firmly.

He spoke to the driver, explaining my request and he changed direction at the next big inter-section and headed down towards the sea. The sedan purred up to the hotel and I got out. The man next to the driver pointed to his watch and indicated that we were in a hurry.

"Yes. I've had all that," I retorted. "Bad staff work. London said no hurry and Tangier is in a flap."

I knew they didn't comprehend, but that from my tone they would know I was displeased at being pushed around. I brushed past a seedy little man who wanted me to buy a diamond ring, "Very cheap- find on beach" ("Yes, I shouldn't wonder !") and two small boys in over-large fez who wanted me to buy large bunches of irises ("Do I look the type?"), and I headed fast across the hotel lobby. A polite French receptionist called out to me and handed me my door key and a telephone message which I thrust into my pocket. Perhaps Ginger had wised-up his girl friend Fern La Verne at the *Juany* and she was short of pesetas or francs. I'd worry about that later. I went up to my room and unlocked the

door. I paused a moment to take in the room, and to see if I could detect if it had been searched. Nothing was out of place. I had read in so many thrillers that the chaps therein concealed their revolvers in the top of the lavatory cistern that I decided this was too obvious a place and had, probably just as unoriginally, hollowed out the pages of Crompton's *Killer Wasps* book and planted my gun therein. I flipped open the book cover and there it was, snug as the proverbial bug in the rug. I took it out and, scrawling on the blotter on the writing desk "Gone to Larache—spread my ashes over the dear Old Med. G.T.", I seized an ancient panama I had purchased once at Sucz, more as a joke than as a serious sartorial note, and thrusting it on my head at a jaunty angle, I went down to the car.

The Dead-End Kids who were to accompany me seemed very relieved to see me, and very soon we reached the Customs at the outskirts of the town. The check was superficial though I expect the authorities would have been somewhat astonished to discover the Mauser under the panama held to my head adhesively and hurtfully by a band-aid.

The hot Moroccan sun beat down onto the sedan and the drive to Larache was colourful and bizarre. We zoomed past little groups of impoverished locals, the men invariably riding little donkeys, humble and resigned, their womenfolk following on foot, probably humble and resigned, too. I suspected this was the real way to treat women but too frequently the species knew a crafty trick or two on how to turn the tables on the masculine sex. Several times en route to Tétuan I noticed little oases in the scrub. A few palm trees and the precious water. Small cavalcades would be approaching from the road and from the hills; wandering groups, families, nomads, peasants, beggars, gipsies, Moslems and families bringing charcoal from Tétuan for the market day at Tangier. It seemed grossly unfair that I should be riding swiftly, covering the distance (in reverse) in just over an hour, while their forty mile trip would take them nearly a week and that week mostly spent walking barefooted in the hot Moroccan sun—their reward, a very few pesetas. It is

easy to say that that was their life and they were used to it : there must have been some envy or resentment at the fabulous American-made cars swiftng by, often scattering them, crowding them off the road. When I read of food at certain places being burned to keep the price high, and remembered the poverty I had seen and read about, I felt that it was time we realised that it might be that only sane people were the insane.

To reach Larache one had to pass through Tétuan and though we passed through at speed, I looked forward to spending more time in a town that looked fascinating; once more, like Tangier a town of contrast with a modern airport, with a Tétuan-Madrid service and a Caliph's Palace with an ancient 'Technicolor' parade once a week.

Not until we passed the airport did I suddenly remember the telephone message. I pulled out the piece of paper on which the message had been written. It said "Mr. Tagore telephoned. Urgent. Tangier 17384."

I noticed that the seven had the little mark across its tail and was probably written by a French telephonist. I could see no reason why Mr. Tagore should ring me as I had been with him. An odd message. Made more odd by the fact that the time on the message was 11.18. I had been with Mr. Tagore at 11.18. I wondered if the Dead-End Kids' desire for speed, the interest in getting me out of Tangier quickly had any bearing on the odd message. I could understand Mr. Tagore having some last-minute instructions for me, but then he would have telephoned at noon a moment or two after I had left him. Then, too, there was another point to consider. Mr. Tagore had not expected me to return to my hotel. Further, Mr. Tagore had not wanted me to go back to the hotel prior to the departure for Larache. Then, suddenly, very clearly, Mr. Tagore's words came back to me. "We wondered why you got this job, Mr. Trenton." And my reply "You're the Big Boss, surely you know that." But clearly Mr. Tagore didn't know that.

Mr. Tagore's "Tangier is well policed these days, but Morocco is a big sprawling place and outside Tangier . . ."

"Outside Tangier" . . . the words took on a most sinister implication.

I had a nasty feeling that perhaps I was being hi-jacked. I decided to return to Tangier. I tapped the driver on the shoulder. He said something to his colleague who turned to me and, assuming that I wanted to know how much farther it was to Larache, made a sign which could be determined as indicating an hour. I shook my head vigorously. I indicated that we should turn round.

"Tanger!" I said in French. **"A Tanger!"** The man indicated that we were going to Larache.

I repeated in English **"Tangier! I wish to return to Tangier."**

Once more the man next to the driver nodded his head negatively.

I gave them one more chance. I shouted angrily **"We go back to Tangier."**

This time my two escorts did not even dignify to turn round. I took up my Mauser which I had placed on the floor of the car once we had passed through the Customs and I released the safety catch. I held the gun at the ready and tapped the man next to the driver on the shoulder.

He turned round with a snarl. Then he saw my gun. To my astonishment he roared with laughter. I was dumbfounded. He said something to the driver who turned for a brief moment, took in the scene, then he, too, laughed heartily. I didn't like the colour of their teeth. I was now hopping mad and I decided to prove I meant business. I fired warningly between them onto the windscreen. There was a click and nothing happened. I tried again. Still nothing. Someone had entered my room at the *Opal* and emptied my revolver—and *these boys were in the know!*

Now it was the turn of the man next to the driver. He put his right hand into the folds of his burnous and I did the only thing I could think of at that precise moment. I threw my revolver at the windscreen. There was a crack as the glass broke and instinctively the driver and the other man ducked. For a moment the driver had lost control of the wheel and I

leant forward and gave it a mighty tug to the left. The car swerved dangerously across the road and crashed into a small handcart that was being pushed towards Tétuan. The driver recovered control of the wheel and jammed on the brakes, in vain. The damage was done. The cart was overturned and I had leaped out of the car and quickly dodged into the nearest doorway. We were in the suburbs of Tétuan and in a moment several people had appeared and the inevitable accusations and protestations ensued. In a moment another car had closed in behind ours and soon there was a confused concatenation of shouting Arabs, braving donkeys and squealing children. From my concealed spot in the doorway I saw that, despite the crowd, the driver's chum was still looking for me and I noticed, too, that his right hand was still stuck into his burnous. I decided I'd *aller*.

I walked boldly into the open house with an apology ready on my lips. On the floor, fast asleep (through fatigue I gathered as these chaps don't touch liquor since Allah the Prophet frowned on it), undisturbed by the noise lay a very fat Arab, snoring unmelodiously. I walked through his house and out the back. A few very exceedingly scrawny chickens added their protests to the general uproar on the roadway. I ran ungallantly through a few yards and when there was a bend in the road I returned again to it, this time through some stygian-like grocery of some kind. I gravely apologised to the proprietor and two or three veiled women customers. I then began walking very quickly towards Tétuan, with many anxious glances behind me.

When I reached the airport I peeled off the road and went down to it. In the small restaurant I had three quick beers and began to feel better. I went to the Moroccan tourist agency, and asked if they would fix me up with a taxi or car. They obligingly did so.

I must have looked extremely ruffled after my long run in the heat but they arranged for the car to take me to Tangier.

When I reached the *Opal* there was a further message to ring Mr. Tagore. I smiled grimly. I'd not only ring him, I'd go round and see him personally; but first I needed a bath.

I unlocked my room door and began to peel off my clothes. I went into the bathroom, ran the bath and went into the bedroom to lay out clean clothes.

It was then that I noticed that Ginsberg the golliwog was not in his accustomed place on the bed. I looked round for him but could not see him. Then I observed that on my dressing table was a small wooden box. On top of the box was my message. The words "Gone to Larache" were missing, cut out of the paper, but

"Spread my ashes in the dear Old Med. G.T."

were still there.

I lifted the message. The box was a small coffin. In it lay my mascot. They had placed Ginsberg in the wooden overcoat.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THIS WAS just a bit too much. Though I was now without the Mauser, I was determined to have a show-down with Mr. Tagore. I refused the convenient taxi which was free just outside the hotel (just in case I found myself en route to Larache again), instead, I went round to the hotel garage to get Ming II.

The Aston was at the back of the garage but convenient to drive out. The be-turbaned attendant was picking his nose and reading a tatty old newspaper. Apart from flicking his eyes off the paper as I passed, whether by accident or design, he took not the slightest interest in me. The Aston's hood was down and I had just sat in the driver's seat and put the ignition key into the dashboard when I noticed some fingerprints on it, and around it. This was not a place on a car a garage attendant would normally touch. Very gingerly I stepped out of the car again and considered my action. I then opened the car door and, bending down by the side of the bonnet, I extended my hand from the lowest possible angle and very, very carefully reached up and switched on the engine. A shot rang out and imbedded itself in the wall behind. The angle of flight was such that had I been in the driver's seat I would have had a neat hole in the head. Some charmer had devised an ingenious booby-trap whereby as soon as I switched on Ming's engine a revolver, expertly wired, banged off and that celebrated writer of light fiction Garway Trenton would be annihilated. Move over golly Ginsberg—it was the deep six for Trenton!

Now, instead of fury I was icy-calm and it was a nasty mood to be in.

The shot had even aroused the nose-picking gent in the small office.

He hurried towards me and, whether as a double-bluff or not I couldn't be sure, he studied my tyres, looking for the

blow-out. By now I had upped the bonnet and was extricating the diabolically-contrived set-up. A neat Mauser, a duplicate of the one I had hurled through the windscreen at Tétuan, confronted me. There was only one bullet in the breech, the spent cartridge that had fortunately missed me, but luckily, I had one of the two spare clips of the original which fortunately fitted.

Thus armed I swung Ming out into the main promenade and made for the *Marsala* Hotel.

I parked in a nearby side street and walked round to the hotel. I was about to cross and ask reception for Mr. Tagore when I changed my mind. I walked straight across to the lifts. The grinning bell-hop was now off duty and a sullen young colleague took me up to the Penthouse. When I turned right, as before, the lift attendant called out:

"Penthouse two, 'ah!"

"Yes Mr. Tagore."

"Gentleman gone. Penthouse empty," he said.

"Oh Yeah." I went to the door and rang the chime bell, leaping back in alarm now fearful that anything electric that I touched would go off with a mighty bang. The elevator boy must have thought me bonkers. I rang and rang and, with a self-satisfied smirk, the boy waited. Reluctantly I realised he could be right. He took me downstairs and I crossed to the reception desk. A clerk, probably Egyptian, who looked as if he had disdained a similar job at the *Dorchester* as being beneath him, waited for my explanation.

"Mr. Tagore," I said brusquely. He looked at me like a Wykehamist at an Etonian before replying.

"Mr. Tagore checked-out of the hotel an hour ago," he said.

"I don't believe you," I said bluntly. He glared at me icily for some seconds and finally turning to the keyboard selected the keys to Penthouse two and insolently threw them on the desk.

Hating to do so, I apologised and turned to go. Then I had another idea. I turned back.

"What is the telephone number of the hotel?" I enquired.

He took up a piece of hotel stationery and flung it across at me. I took it, brought out the slip of paper with the telephone number containing Mr. Tagore's 'phone message and compared the two numbers. They were quite different—both number and dialling pre-fix. I hurried out of the hotel. The heat of the day, after the air-conditioned *Marsala*, hit me like a clonk in the stomach from a kangaroo. I made for the nearest bacall. Since there are no telephone kiosks, calls are made from these general stores. When I got through a very British voice, slightly off, answered me. I asked for Mr. Tagore and said who I was. A voice, quite unlike the Tagore I had met at the *Marsala* answered. It seemed relieved to hear me.

"Trenton? Oh that's all right. We've been anxious about you!"

"That could be the understatement of the year!" I replied.

"How soon can you get over?"

I was wary about that.

"Look, chum, I've already met one Tagore since my arrival and that was one too many."

There was silence at the other end of the telephone. Clearly someone was puzzled.

"One minute," said the voice, "didn't Captain Cuffley-Evans meet you?"

"If he did he was disguised in a sepia make-up and calling himself Ali Ben Mahoot," I retorted.

There seemed to be a muttered curse at the other end of the 'phone.

"You'd better come over at once," the voice said.

"Thanks!" I replied. "The mountain can come to Mahomet, if that's the right quote. I'll be at the *Opal*--guns loaded!"

I decided to meet the newcomers in the hotel lobby and I had the Mauser conveniently strapped under my right arm. I am fortunate to be ambidextrous and it occurred to me that the gents in question might look for a sinister bulge under my left arm but wouldn't expect an assailant to be left-handed. Confucious he say darn clever these 'Special Eyes'!

I had not long to wait. A tall, very handsome Indian in a white tropical suit entered escorted by a military-looking Englishman in a khaki drill suit and sporting a Gunners' tie. If these were phonies my name was Marilyn Monroe; but I remembered quite painfully, in view of the gun wound he gave me, how wrong I had been about a military chap in the South of France the previous year.

Another thing that pleased me was the fact that they went up to the reception desk and asked for me. No up-the-back-stairs-and-mum's-the-word lark, I was glad to record. I got up and crossed to them, feeling a little like Wyatt Earp, hands just slightly away from the body, ready for the draw. The receptionist had just pointed me out to them as I reached them. The good-looking Indian gave me a long, searching look and I had to smirk a little when the military character's eyes flicked quickly to my left side, then back to my face. He seemed put out that I was grinning.

"Mr Trenton?"

I nodded.

"I am Umesh Tagore," the Indian said in an educated voice, "this is Major Swinley."

I nodded again. No handshake.

"Shall we talk?" The new Tagore suggested.

I began to conduct them to a more private lounge when Mr. Tagore stopped me.

"Your room, perhaps?"

I shook my head.

"Not tonight, Josephine!" I said. Mr. Tagore looked puzzled. The Major came to his aid.

"A quotation, sir. Napoleon said it to Josephine," he began, but I cut in, "Actually he didn't. It's a fallacy, but it doesn't matter. The other lounge is very quiet—very quiet indeed but, of course, I'll sit near a convenient bell-push!" I said.

"You seem alarmed—er—quite unduly." Mr. Tagore reassured me.

"Maybe," I retorted, "but you forget I've already met one Mr. Tagore!" I reminded him. He nodded and indicated that the lounge would be suitable for our talk.

There was an elderly lady snoring gently in a chair and, unless she could lip-read in her sleep, for we were out of earshot, she was harmless even if she was M.I.5.

"Before we talk, I think it might be as well to show one another credentials."

"Agreed."

Mr. Tagore and Major Swinley produced two small but impressive-looking passes that could have been forged as easy as falling off Westminster Bridge. I told them this as I produced my own bits and pieces saying, of course, this, too, applied to me!

Mr. Tagore grinned. "So what is your suggestion?"

"I haven't one. I can tell you how I came to be here and so far what's happened, but that still wouldn't prove anything," I said.

"One thing then, before you talk. Did a young man, red headed, very—er—fair-complexioned..." Mr. Tagore, grinning no doubt at the thought of his own coffee-coloured skin as he said this and by no means abashed, then continued, "rather military in bearing and with a slight stutter meet you?"

"You asked me this before and I said no."

"I am very worried," Mr. Tagore said, turning to the Major. The Major also bent a trifle and nodded.

"'fraid they copped him, sir," he said.

"You mean they—t'other side had got wind of me even before I arrived and put in a phoney you?"

"Precisely."

"Well I had figured as much, but I didn't tumble to it until I got your 'phone message. By the time I read that I was en route to Larache to be creased," I imparted. The Major whistled.

"You can imagine just how vast an organisation we have against us," the Major said.

"Us?"

Mr. Tagore looked steadily at me for a moment. "Herr Otto von Schneider wanted you here. He is with us."

"Good old Interpol!" I said.

There was a further pause, then the Major said :

"Why don't you spill the beans?"

"O.K. I will."

I told them the whole story. They listened in silence though they exchanged several glances as I reported, as factually as I could, all that had occurred from the fatal moment when Mr. Shadrack had rung my flat and I had facetiously called myself *Abed-nego*. When I had finished my story Mr. Tagore nodded.

"It's a pity that they have found out all about you. You are of no value to us. It was a good idea of Otto's, but not quite good enough; we under-estimated their counter-intelligence," he said. "This narcotic organisation is world-wide. I am sorry Mr. Tienton, you are of no use to us," he concluded.

"In short you are saying was my journey really necessary and it ain't?"

"Not to put too fine a point upon it," the Major interjected, "yes! You'd better go home."

"And quickly. You are a marked man," Mr. Tagore added.

I knew now that they proposed to send me packing that at least they were genuine. I replied, ruefully :

"It's a shame. It was fun while it lasted "

Major Swinley at last looked at me as if he quite liked me. "Quite an understatement," he said. "Nevertheless I should go back. We'll fix you up, there's an Air France 'plane tomorrow for Nice and Paris, the sooner --"

"But I came with Ming," I said. Major Swinley looked down his nose. I realised he thought Ming a Chinese concubine.

"Ming is a Super-leggera Spyder-Aston Martin," I explained. The Major brightened considerably at this information, but Mr. Tagore had his mind on other things.

"Poor young Captain Cuffley-Evans," he said. "I wonder what they will do to him?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

I **FELT** sorry for Captain Cuffley-Evans, but I'd no doubt these chaps had their own hefty organisation that could do something about him. I shook hands with Mr. Tagore and the Major and went upstairs to pack. I did this carefully, not because I was necessarily a tidy or careful person (I was on fighters, not T.B.R.s with the Fleet Air Arm), but because you could tell if your suitcase had been rifled if you'd packed meticulously—I was becoming quite a Sherlock Holmes in my own comic way.

Since there was quite a bit of the day left I decided to take a walk. The Hotel *Opal* is on the seafront and not far from the centre of the town, and so I began the climb up towards the Casbah. The contrasts of Tangier once again struck me; the startling wealth, the big Cadillacs not only of the Europeans, but of the rich Moslems, and the humble donkeys resigned, obedient, carrying fantastic burdens; television sets and refrigerators in shop windows, windows into which veiled Moslem women and Moroccan begums gazed in fascination; the modern buildings, Leica cameras, plastic goods, a stone's throw from dank, cavernous hovels. . . . In the Grand Succo there was a blaze of colour from the flowers, the itinerant vendors, in ancient burnous, sitting on their haunches picking their noses or sipping the sickly-sweet, milkless mint tea. En route I was, as all tourists are, pestered by the spivs, in taiboushes or fezes, who wanted to sell me a fine gold watch or a set of indecent photographs. Fat, unveiled women, swathed in white, with big baskets of vegetable merchandise and enormous brimmed hats, sat imperiously at their own special spots in the market; men, unshaven, talked volubly in the open air cafés, while there were queues of veiled women with large parcels and luggage, sitting waiting for the bus to take them to Tétuan.

I tasted the mint tea and watched a party of tourists

attempt to take a snap of a seller of water melons. He shrieked angrily at them and yelled threats; one of the many locals who believed the Europeans were 'pointing the evil eye' at him.

Nearby, an elderly Arab woman, with a group of grinning Arabs around her, listened to her wax sarcastic about an old Jew (the Jews in this area were easily recognisable because they wore black turbans and black burnous). The elderly Semite, resigned, patient, tolerant, listened to her scornful abuse, accepting it but knowing he was shrewder, craftier and more industrious than the Arab shrew would ever be (the Moroccans were the industrious ones—not the Arabs). He accepted her vituperations just as, for centuries, his race had accepted the curses, the vilifications, and, often, the envy of the other nations. . . . It was probable he'd have the last laugh, but it would be up his sleeve or in the privacy of his own room.

Not far from him a pottery seller had set out his wares on the ground and a passer-by in a hurry had knocked one over and broken it. Another small crowd had gathered to enjoy the ensuing verbal battle, broken up eventually by a small but resolute Moroccan policeman. It was an international city all right and it was a town of hustle and bustle as well as lethargy; of noise, of strident calls, car hooters; the heterogeneous mass of strange, shifting humanity began to grow on me. I was beginning to fall under its spell.

Outside the money changer's offices small groups swarmed round the blackboards on which were written the fluctuating rates of the various currencies of the world. Men would hurry from one blackboard to another in this free money market, comparing the number of pesetas or francs the bank would give for pounds or dollars, while the women, veiled save for their eyes, passed by to do their shopping. On the Boulevard Pasteur I sat outside one of the French-style cafés watching this cosmopolitan crowd, French, Spanish, Arabic, Moroccan, Algerian, swarming past. I was fascinated by the Moslem women, the wealthy in expensive, well-cut material of dark blues, fawns, deep blues, and contrasting with the

smart high-heeled shoes, the lesser breeds in their white (and a lot of them needed a packet of those I.T.V. detergents rather badly!), and sandals. I never realised how provocative it could be until that moment only to see a woman's eyes! There was mystery, excitement, coquetry, disdain, indifference, question, and even hate as these mysterious feminine eyes passed me by and the chatty little Arab show-boy cleaned my shoes at the table and others passed by, trying to persuade me that nuts were the things to build-up the evening appetite.

And by now I had an appetite. I talked to the French café owner and asked him the best place to dine.

"Ah Monsieur! Tangier caters gastronomically for every taste, now for steaks, Salin at the *Grillon* is excellent. Or if you would like an Arab meal there's a restaurant the *El Magreb* in the Cashah. You can have almost any food you like here from Portuguese to Swiss."

"Though," I said with a grin, "the French, as always, is the best!"

The *patron* smiled back.

"Monsieur is a man of taste. For the gourmet there is, of course, French food and many excellent French restaurants, undoubtedly the *Hermitage* is the one for you—or the *Grenouille* or *Pernoquet*. There are many to choose from."

"What about the *Et Balcon*?" I enquired. I had read when I was genuing-up about this one.

"That is the roof restaurant at the modern *Velasquez* Hotel. There you can dine and dance," the *patron* told me.

"Alas! No *parties*, I..." but I stopped. "Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "May I be rolled in honey and given to the ants!"

"*Comment?*"

"I clean forgot Miss Calor Gas for 1950!" I exclaimed.

"*Monsieur?*" The *patron* looked very startled and wondered how many of his *finer* I had consumed.

"Fern La Verne!" I said. "Ginger's old chum, of course! Where, *Monsieur le patron*, is the *Juany*?"

The *patron* told me, adding, "But the *Juany* does not get alive till later. Eat first, go along later."

I decided to take his advice and drive out in the Aston to the Robinson at Cap. S. Portee, where I had one of their special omelettes, before going on to my 'blind date' at the *Juany*.

I took my time over my meal, remembering Sir Walter Raleigh's advice :

Eat slowly; only men in rags
And gluttons old in sin
Mistake themselves for carpet bags
And tumble victuals in

Then I went in search of the *Juany*

Now that night had flung her garment over the city, the gay, artificial jewels of neon signs winked and flowed enticingly. The night was balmy and I was balmer than the night ! Ginger's idea of an *éclatante* woman and mine sometimes coincided and sometimes didn't, and when I say didn't I mean didn't ! There had been that Little Number he gave the Big Rush to at the Boko, one of the many "clubs" with near-nude shows that had mushroomed recently in the West End of London. She was the 'oh-you-kid-what-big-er-eyes I've got' type, and Ginger had been very hurt when I had referred to her as Miss Nutty-Not-so-Slack !

Then there had been that Aristo he had cared for. Very Upper Class. You know the type. They always talk very loudly and are utterly oblivious of other people. Selfish and arrogant —let's face it, we had a few of the male variety at Eton, but at least there one could kick the occasional behind. This gal had acquired that *chi-chi* upper class gimmick that bull-fighting was *de rigueur*. She bubbled the usual nonsense about moments of truth and found it all 'fun'. Fox hunting was fun, too. And, of course, deer hunting. Great fun. Everything was fun *except* fun. She had looked so equine that had I been Ginger, I'd have slapped a saddle on her and driven her into the sea and rescued the poor stag from a watery grave.

And then there was that willowy mannequin who looked as vacant as an empty thermos flask and said 'It's dreamy' to everything. There was— but why go on? It was true we *did*

sometimes agree, about Tracey Mendip, for example, or Evadne Montuion, and Ginger had made it clear that Charity Stockton was atomic. What of Fern La Verne? She sounded rather like Ginger's old flame Miss Nutty-Not-so-Slack. With this thought in mind I turned away from the *Juany*, then paused. I was restless and didn't want to go back to the *Opal* so soon. This was to be my last night in Tangier, I ought to see the town; from the New Casino to the Crystal Palace night club, from the *El Minzah* patio to the bar at the Hotel *Cecil*. In short, 'the lot, my dear!' And so I turned back and entered the *Juany*.

If I had expected some fantastic place full of strange atmosphere, of savage Morocco, I couldn't have been more wrong, the *Juany* was the sort of night club you could find almost anywhere in the world. Small, sorry! *Intimate* is the word I believe, with quite an attractive *décor*, gay, modern and certainly not the sort of style you would want to go home to. There was a three-piece orchestra of Europeans (French, I was to learn later) and, though the French can't play or dance jazz (though they think they can) these three boys made tolerable music. The atmosphere was smoky (though the predominant tobacco smell was Gauloise(s)) and the crowd almost entirely European. Only the Moroccan waiters gave away the fact that this was Tangier, not London, Paris or New York; and just as in any of these capitals, the tables were too close and the dance floor too small. In short, the *Juany* was typical and, for those that liked that sort of thing, had atmosphere. I was given a pretty lousy table near the band, but when I wrote a note to Fern La Verne, and requested that it be sent round to her, the manager decided I was a V.I.P. and I was instantly moved to a front table which gave me a full view of the dance floor without the tintinabulation in my ear.

As soon as I had sent the note round I had regrets. What a crazy thing to do! I was too old for blind dates. Why in hades hadn't I waited until I'd taken a dekko at the lady? It could be I would rather be tucked up in bed reading about

Mr Crompton's spider or *The Elizabethans at Home* It was all right for Ginger who, sometimes smitten by the voice of a telephonist, would arrange to meet her outside the Underground wearing a crimson carnation, and then cruise slowly by in a chariot and tread on the accelerator if she wasn't his *tasse de thé*, but I thought this pretty despicable, I mean, I think the girl ought to be allowed a fifty-fifty arrangement and be able to turn down the mile if she didn't like his face Once more I decided to quit and I had signalled to the waiter to bring me a bill for my vodka and ginger beer, when the percussionist gave the skins a long pseudo-classy roll, and what few lights that were on were dimmed even more—and that was quite a feat The waiter was so astonished at my behaviour that he had the temerity to shake his head vigorously in response I'd jolly well have to lump the cabaret

The pianist then announced, as if we were at the *Café de Paris* in the peak days of Noel Coward Dietrich and Kay Thompson "Messieurs et Mesdames I 'ave the great honour to present the star of our cabaret ze one and only, incomparable Fern La Verne!"

There was the usual desultory hand clap and a few of the not-so-many customers continued to talk I don't know what I expected—a big flashy blonde, perhaps certainly not the personality who came out The band started her intro music *Got to Sing a Torch Song* and you could see that she had read somewhere that Mary Martin or someone had said that Every night must be a first night, she was petite flat-chested and rather mousey, her fair hair needed attention and her chalky-white make-up was effective, she had the wrong colour lipstick slash'd any old how on her mouth, *but* she had belief and she had magnetism and, as she started to sing, deep and true I felt my scalp go all tingly, for I am a complete ass when someone good does their stuff let it be a pilot who can handle a Scimitar jet or a classical pianist or a four minute miler I just gulp and feel I'm ten feet tall

CHAPTER NINE

I WAS fascinated by Fern's performance. It wasn't that she sang particularly well, it was the fact that she had personality and it was her personality that held the customers. Today is the day of the No-Talent brigade; youngsters without any gift at all, can get up because they believe they are wonderful, and they convince listeners, too, that they are terrific; but it is ego not talent. Fern's talent was her belief in her songs; that, I think, was the subtle difference.

I sat smoking a cigar and tried to analyse her success. She had something, in the way of 'a quality'; yet she wasn't a dish. it was just an interesting face, rather hard, yet she was an arresting-looking girl, in her late twenties, pale and thin with large, almond-shaped grey eyes and lovely fair hair, shoulder length. If she had beauty it was in her sadness rather than in her physical appearance. She had a fragile, slightly fey quality, so that, with the main lights out and a solo spotlight trained on her, she was the ideal 'blues' singer. For late cabaret, she was tops—the customers liked to get a little sad after a few drinks, the women reliving their memories, the men thinking of the women that there might still be to come tomorrow. Fern was worthy of better places than the *Juany*. But Fern did not *care*, it was this *indifference* that made her act a success, if being the cabaret star of Tangier meant anything. It was surprising what a success you could be, if you didn't care!

On the conclusion of her first number, apart from a brief acknowledgment of the applause, Fern went into Cole Porter's *Night and Day* and it was then that I hit trouble. A few people were talking at a far table, inevitably at these clip-joints there was a table of types who didn't like cabaret, but I didn't realise that they were a plant until the end of the song when, seemingly from nowhere, three men, nasty-looking geezers wearing dark suits, suddenly ganged-up on

me. They spoke a sort of bastard English. "Shut up! You make noise. Spoil cabaret. We throw you out!" They said. The three of them ringed me. I had stood up and had my back to the table. If they had worked in unison, I wouldn't have stood a chance, but they worked independently and, as the first one lunged at me, I used an old Judo trick, using his weight as he grabbed, I pitched him headlong on the table. I then dropped quickly to the floor as the other two men made for me from either side so that for a second they held one another, then, from the floor I yanked at their ankles. They toppled heavily and, as they fell, a nasty-looking knife—the sort used by the Commandoes—fell piercing my right hand, pinning it to the floor. It was too early to feel any pain, I was just surprised. I quickly pulled the shining blade from my hand and rolled under the table. By now, there was commotion in the *Juany*. A free-for-all had started. I grinned, took my handkerchief out and mopped at my wounded hand which was bleeding splendidly on the night club's carpet. Then, suddenly, the table was unceremoniously lifted out of the way and I was seized by two stalwart Moorish gents, in white djellabahs, muscular and determined. I fought furiously to resist being chucked-out. I knew that once outside the chaimers who had deliberately attacked me would soon make me look like a piece of raw beef. The blood from my knife wound was spattering the Moors' djellabahs but they were winning and it was only a matter of moments before I was ignominiously being frog-marched towards the exit. At this moment the manager stepped forward, he said something in Arabic and all I could understand was Fern La Verne. Apparently, knowing her, was my escape. I was instantly released. I looked round quickly for my assailants but they had been given the bums rush. I expect they were waiting for me outside the night club.

All the time the furore was taking place, Fern La Verne had sat on the piano waiting for it to die down. She certainly had guts; perhaps she was used to that sort of thing. The manager led me to his office, off which was a lavatory. I washed my nice, clean knife wound and he fixed up my hand

with a goodly dollop of disinfectant and two fat band-aids. As I had a nip of his brandy I could hear Fern La Verne giving out to the customers.

"*Molto bene ! Magnifico !*" I said nodding in the direction of Fern. He agreed.

"She is good ! Much good."

I didn't wish to spoil my welcome by saying 'too good for the *Juany*', but I wanted to. He said : "Why these men attack you?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Maybe they didn't like the cut of my jib," I said.

He shrugged his shoulders, waiting for a translation.

"Perhaps they took exception to my tailor," I tried again. Still he did not comprehend.

"Bad men !" was his comment.

"*Vous pouvez dire ça une autre fois !*" I agreed. Apparently it doesn't translate. I gave him a left handshake and a grateful pat on the shoulders and promised him an autographed book which wouldn't do him much good.

"Taxi?" He asked. I shook my head. I wanted to talk to Fern. I indicated I wanted to go back in again. He smiled and led the way.

Fern's final number was *Ain't Misbehavin'*, another oldie slightly more up beat to end on, but still torchy and, when she had finished, she acknowledged the applause and went off behind the scenes.

When she joined me she was wearing a crisp white linen blouse and a tight navy blue skirt. She could easily have been a stenographer. But on closer inspection and without all that Max Factor, she was lined and too hard-faced for a stenog, I thought. Her accent was strong American and cutting.

"Thanks," she said, "for lousing-up my act."

"Not at all," I retorted. "At any rate I woke the customers up for you."

She didn't laugh, but she made a slight grimace, acknowledging it.

"So how's Ginger?" she enquired.

I told her, finally asking: "But how did you and Ginger — — ?"

"He picked me up," she said, without any embarrassment, "near the *El Minzah*. I was outside a shop, looking at a suitcase."

"Intending to leave?"

"Intending to leave." Fern paused for a moment. "But I rarely do leave. I just stay on—and sing."

"And sing well. Better than well! You were good."

"But?"

"Nothing, except little things. I believe with a good manager — —"

"You?"

"No, I'm a scribbler, didn't I tell you?"

"Go on about how I can be improved." She said.

"Don't be so narked, all I mean is I don't think you are making the best of your— er— material," I said.

"You mean you don't like my songs?" •

"No, not that. Your hair, f'r instance."

"Sure. It needs a permanent. But on my pay I can afford to get it done once—at Hallowe'en, and that's a long way off." She had rather a harsh, mid-western accent that would not have got her far in the film world. But I liked her.

"What little things?" she asked me.

"I mean the presentation of your act, the *style* of it—and don't you think for this sort of joint you could use a larger—er—balcony?"

"Balcony? I don't get it."

"I mean—er—bosom," I explained. Fern wasn't outraged, she merely looked at me with indifference.

"When I first started out - a honky tonk in L.A.—Mr. Shultz—he was the manager—he suggested I would please the customers if I wore falsies. I looked at him with contempt. 'I sing' I said.

" 'Yeah, baby, but you know, all these airline pilots and smart customers we get in— they like a girl to have a figure, see?' " Mr. Shultz replied.

" 'So what's stopping 'em?' I said.

"'Now don't get me wrong, Fern', Mr. Shultz said. 'I think you sing dandy, see? But what's the harm in bolstering your figure, who knows, maybe a guy from MGM might come in and sign you!'

"'Mr. Shultz,' I said, 'when do I finish?'

"'When do you finish what?' Mr. Shultz said."

I was amused at the way she meticulously prefaced this character Shultz with a 'Mister' this was a throw-back to the days when she was nothing but a nobody and everyone was better than she.

"'When do I leave?' I said.

"'No one's askin' you to go anywheres, habee', Mr. Shultz replied.

"'Mister Shultz', I said 'I guess there must be hundreds of out of work strip-teasers around Forty Fourth and Broadway, big-bosomed habbies, just what you need. Why don't you grab one of the aircraft that pull in here every half-hour and take a trip, buy yourself a nice double-breasted woman', I said. I guess I scandalised Mr. Shultz. 'An' just as soon as you're fixed up, you tell me', I said. 'I can go and work at the Coconut Grove anytime'."

"So what did *Mister* Shultz say to that?" I enquired.

"'O K. Fern', Mr. Shultz said. 'if that's the way you feel'.

"'Yes, that's the way I feel', I said.

"'O K., no falsies', says Mr. Shultz."

I nodded.

"No falsies. Then we ain't giving nobody no false hopes, see?" Fern told me. I looked at her steadily for some time. finally I asked :

"What's wrong with you, Fern? Why are you so tough? Who gave you a raw deal?"

She had lit a cigarette and glared at me as she did so. The cigarette smoke got in her eyes.

"When I know you better maybe you'll tell me about it," I suggested. Fern La Verne didn't deign to answer. To mollify her I added : "But you have got something."

She had heard it all before; maybe even from Ginger. I tried to convince her.

"I mean it. I think you've got something," I repeated.

"Yeah. And quite a lot of guys want it!" she said. I was shocked by her cynicism and said so. She shrugged her shoulders.

"So what brings you to Morocco - going to join the Foreign Legion?" she asked sarcastically.

"No."

"Vacation?"

"Sort of. But I told you, I write. I'm here sopping up atmosphere for a book." I thought it better to explain.

"Oh, one of those!" she said. "Writers. . . !" She had obviously had trouble with writers.

"You don't care for writers?"

"How do you limeys put it? I've 'had' writers."

"Well, I won't be troubling you. I'm off home tomorrow," I imparted.

She didn't seem to care. She said :

"Did they try to cut you?" Indicating my hand.

I nodded. Even this didn't seem to surprise her. "Hurt?"

"Throbs a bit, now. I'll live." She nodded and changed the subject.

"This is quite a town," she said.

"Tangier?"

"Yes. It's the nastiest place to live in Morocco and you can blame the Europeans! You know Marseilles or Suez or Algiers?"

"A little. I served in the Royal Navy."

"The British Navy?" She interrupted me.

"Yes. Fleet Air Arm. We got around," I said.

"Well Tangier's nastier than any of those spots. It doesn't say much for the Europeans. They loused it up good!" Fern said. Her eyes glared as she said this. She had an extraordinary face, a face that positively compelled one to like it. Her eyes were cerulean? gentian, perhaps? It was her eyes that made her so vital.

I said : "To think I nicknamed you Miss Calor Gas!"

"Huh?"

"I mean before we met! Blind dates can be pretty hazardous things," I said.

She studied me for some time.

"Cigarette me!" she commanded. I gave her one.

"You trying to make a pass at me?" she asked.

"Not yet," I said.

I had known some curious girls but I think Fern was the most curious.

"What are you thinking?"

I told her.

She didn't answer that one, so I asked:

"Would you like to dance?"

Fern shook her head.

"O.K., then tell me the story of your life," I suggested.

Fern didn't even smile but, surprisingly, answered:

"Maybe — — one day."

"Shall I see you home?" I asked her.

"Why?" she asked. "I've been seeing myself home ever since I've been here. I can take care of myself."

"I have sort of caught on to that," I said, "but it could be that I'd like to see you home."

"I don't know what your friend Ginger told you but you're wasting your time, mister!" Fern told me.

"I have been known to take a female of the species home *without* making a pass at her," I said.

"Yeah — — your maiden aunt!" was Fern's retort.

By now I had given up, but, as she went off to change, she said suddenly:

"O.K., as far as my front door, then."

The manager thought it best that we leave by his side door. I refused the first taxi on principle and took the second. The taxi men argued about this, but I was adamant. Fern's flat was a short way up the hill, past the Spanish airline building on the way out of the city. True to her word, she stopped me at the door.

"Goodbye now, writer-man!" she said.

I looked crestfallen which at least moved her to say:

"Didn't you believe me?"

"Of course, but in life one spends a lot of time hoping for miracles."

"Ever get any?" she enquired.

"Oh yes," I said. "I am a firm believer in miracles."

"I wish I was!" Fern said wistfully. She looked at me for a moment and then, surprisingly, came towards me and, putting her arms round my neck, pulled my head down towards hers. She kissed me passionately, then, as suddenly as she had grabbed me, so she let me go.

"Goodbye, writer-man!" She said abruptly and, unlocking the front door to her apartment, hurried in. I called out, stepping forward:

"But Fern, when shall I — —"

The door banged sepulchrally and with a tremendous finality I was about to bang on the door when I remembered this was a block of flats, and I had begun to know Fern. I turned to get back into the cab, changed my mind and paid him off.

It was a lovely night, the sort of night one would have liked to be dancing to a cha-cha under the stars with a beautiful woman in one's arms. It was a splendid night in which to have driven that sad-faced girl along to Spartei perhaps, even to have had a moonlight bathe there. I was angry at the thought that I might not see Fern again; besides my hand was hurting like hell. As I walked I was conscious of the approach of a car coming at speed along the road behind me. I was on the pavement, walking slowly, and was not bothered by this ordinary event, except, driving as I did a great deal, I could tell that the car was coming in fast. So fast did it sound that I turned. It was lucky I did so, the driver had mounted the pavement and was driving the car straight at me. I leapt for safety, dodging behind one of the trees that lined the road. The driver of the car, in his desire to get me, swung the steering wheel round following my flight and crashed into the tree. The tree withstood the shock but the two men in the front were flung into the windscreen. Before I scrambled over the nearest wall and ran like hell, I saw that the two men were my old amigos who had tried to

take me for a ride to Larache. I decided that, *unlike* Skegness, Tangier, for me, was not so bracing!

I dodged through some back streets, running fast, until I reached the comparative safety of the Boulevard Pasteur where there were still quite a number of solid-looking citizens. I took a free cab back to the *Opal*. One of the night clerks handed me a package. It contained a ticket for myself and for the Aston for the morning, Tangier to Gib — — one way, and was I glad!

I took my key and went up to my room. I put the key in the door and stopped suddenly. There might be a welcoming committee within.

I suddenly swung open the door and leapt back awaiting a burst of fire from a Beretta, perhaps.

It looked powerful dark in there. Just as dark as I imagined Hades and it could be a posse of armed Cerberuses crouched just within the door. I realised I'd made the perfect silhouette target. I ran back to the corridor light switch and turned it out. It sort of evened things up. I tiptoed back to the open door and heard breathing from within my room. My scalp prickled. I wished that the elevator boy had not gone down so quickly. I gulped. There was, I remembered, an Arabic proverb 'Thine unspoken word is thy slave, thy spoken one thy master.' With this in mind I swallowed once more and then said as coolly as I could, pseudo-facetiously:

"Hold your fire, boys. I'm leaving in the morning."

"I hope not," a voice within my room said. The voice was female.

CHAPTER TEN

I WAITED. For a time there was silence save for our breathing, then : "You are Mr. Garway Trenton?" the voice enquired.

"Yes." Who else could I claim to be?

Suddenly the light was switched on in my room.

"Won't you come in?"

I thought that this was bizarre all right. I said, still waiting in the corridor .

"Why did you have the light out?"

"Because if it had not been you, whoever it was would have been a better target."

"That sounds reasonable enough," I said, feeling slightly better about the whole thing. "It sounds as if you are on my side."

"I am," the woman said, "Mrs Cuffley-Evans."

For a moment I was puzzled.

"The name seems to strike a bell."

"Captain Cuffley-Evans' wife."

I remembered then. The man who was supposed to have met me at the ferry.

"Oh !"

I walked quickly into my room. Standing at the light switch by the fireplace, was a beautiful woman in a white two-piece. She wore a small, white basket hat. Her shoes, too, were white but she wore no stockings. If it had not been for these flat, white kid, Italian-type shoes, she would have seemed even taller. I imagined she was a little conscious of her height and did everything she could to avoid underlining it. She was suntanned an even golden-brown, very complimentary to her colouring. Her white clothes emphasised her suntan. She probably realised that. As a contrast to her ensemble, in the breast pocket of her well-cut coat frothed a black lace handkerchief. She wore no jewellery but on the

wrist of her outstretched arm, as she still lightly held the light switch, I noticed a thick gold bracelet to which was attached a large locket.

"Good evening!" I greeted her. "Or, to be more precise," I said, glancing at my watch, "Good morning!"

"Mr. Trenton," she said, ignoring my facetiousness and coming to the point, "I want you to find my husband."

"Want me to find your husband?" I repeated parrot-like. "Yes."

I shut the door and locked it.

"But, Mrs. Evans, I'm awfully sorry. I don't know anything about your husband's disappearance and, besides, I'm leaving Tangier tomorrow morning." I held out the package left me by Mr. Tagore, adding further, "here are my tickets."

She looked at me steadfastly. She was tall, dark and exceedingly beautiful. Her eyes wide, brown with thick lashes without make-up burned at me with an intensity I found very powerful. She had a small nose with nostrils that flared like a racehorse and I wondered as I looked at her if she put some pink substance in them to make them so pink. Her mouth, serious, determined, was large and, though I had only just been smitten by Fern La Verne, I instantly felt that I wanted to kiss it. Nor could I entirely blame the climate.

"Mr. Trenton," Mrs. Cuffley-Evans said, after we had gazed at one another, mentally warily walking round each other, "I need your help!"

"But, Mrs. Evans, I've told you," I replied, "I'm going home, tomorrow. Surely Mr. Tagore and his chap can find your husband for you?"

"I doubt it. And, in any case, if they do—it will be too late."

"Why too late?"

"You don't seem to understand—this is a matter of life or death. My husband is in mortal danger."

"How do you know that?"

Mrs. Evans looked at me once more for what seemed a very long time, as if she wanted to be quite certain in her own mind that I was who I said I was. Then, with a very

quick movement, she crossed to the armchair where she had been sitting awaiting my return and, deftly opening her handbag, she brought out a small wooden box. This she handed to me.

The box was of sandalwood and had the same design as the coffin that had been made for Ginsberg, my golliwog. In fact, the only difference was that this box was much smaller, no bigger than a large-sized match box.

"Someone sent you this?"

"Yes. It was delivered today to our house. Open it!" Mrs. Evans requested. I did so.

In it, lying on a wad of cotton wool, lay a human finger, neatly severed below the joint, just below a plain gold ring. I gasped.

"Good night!" I exclaimed. "What's the idea?"

"That finger is my husband's!" Mrs. Evans said. Not melodramatically, not with anger, not with fear. She merely stated a fact.

"Your husband's?" I reiterated asininely. "But how do you know?"

"Because I gave him that ring on our wedding day," Mrs. Evans replied.

"But, but couldn't it be someone else's finger? Couldn't whoever sent it have put your husband's ring on someone else's finger?" I suggested.

"No. It was impossible to get the ring off. We often joked about it."

I thought . . . 'the joke's sort of over'. I said, dogmatically : "Well, it could have been cut through and then put on someone else's finger?"

"Examine it for yourself," Mrs. Evans replied. "It has not been cut through and rejoined."

I decided to take Mrs. Evans' word for it. I asked again :

"But what's the idea?"

"It is a warning. There will be some sort of message or command. It will probably be at home for me when I get there. *That is why I want your help.*"

"But, Mr. Tagore. . . .?"

"They will expect me to go to Mr. Tagore. That is why I came to you."

"But you were probably followed. Shadowed here. They probably know now."

"I don't think so," Mrs. Evans said, almost serenely. "I took the precaution of making sure I was not."

Mrs. Cuffley-Evans was quite a character.

"But they already have indicated their displeasure at my appearance. They rumbled me before I left London," I imparted. "I've had it. In fact, it is Mr. Tagore who is sending me home."

"Exactly! You leave on the ferry but you come back!"

I gazed at Mrs. Evans with some admiration.

"You seem to have it all worked out!"

"Not quite all, but I do want your help. My husband came to meet you. . . ."

"And was kidnapped," I butted in. "This I know. And a phoney Mr. Tagore sent me off to Larache and en route two of his favourite chaps tried to crease me."

"Crease?"

"Eliminate. Cut the jolly old pipeline. But," I enquired, "why should they capture your husband and—and sever his finger?"

"I don't know yet but when I do, I'll want your help, Mr. Trenton. I'll want it badly," Mrs. Evans replied.

"Mrs. Cuffley-Evans," I said, "tell me one thing—why don't you go to Mr. Tagore?"

"Mr. Trenton, you don't seem to know these people at all. They are utterly unscrupulous. Why didn't they kill my husband at once? They want me to do something—in return for my husband's life. If I make any move that seems at all suspicious, they'll kill him—and I know enough about these people to tell you it will be some ghastly slow torture!" Mrs. Evans put her hand wearily to her head, it was a gesture that seemed to prove that despite her *sang-froid* she was suffering from acute nervous exhaustion. I was once more intrigued by the plain gold locket on her wrist. I said:

"Perhaps I had better see what your husband looks like."

Mrs. Evans looked nonplussed.

"Since he didn't meet me, I've no idea. . . ." I began to explain, then she cut in.

"Oh, I see! I will show you a photo of him that I have at home," Mrs. Evans said. She made no attempt to show me the locket. Who else but her husband would have his photo in her locket? And yet that was silly because it could be, say, a lock of his hair, or something equally fatuous though, at that moment, I couldn't think what. Once more Mrs. Cuffley-Evans looked steadfastly at me. Was I being led into another trap? I had a theory that the theory that people looking straight into your eyes proved their innocence was strictly *Piazza San Marco* stuff -strictly for the birds, sheer alfalfa. And yet . . . I was intrigued and I was still narked at the way these boyos were kicking me up the backside. To be given a ticket home and pushed off after a few hours was pretty ignominious. And Mrs. Evans had a quality I found hard to resist. Besides I had been bored at home and had craved excitement. Finally, of course, I also wanted to see what made Fern tick. I made up my mind.

"All right, Mrs. Cuffley-Evans, I'll stay and help you," I told her.

Mrs. Cuffley-Evans smiled. Not a triumphant smile, just a warm, soft smile which had a glow. Her teeth were white, even, and they looked so good I took a step towards her to assure myself that they were her own.

Instantly she stepped back.

I was taken by surprise at this move.

"My! My! You're jumpy!" I said. "I was merely admiring your teeth."

"I'm sorry," she said, "I am a bit nervy. Yes," she added, answering my unasked question, "they are my own."

"*C'est du Nanon!*" I exclaimed.

"I beg your pardon?"

"They really are something."

Mrs. Cuffley-Evans looked round the bedroom and took off her coat. This gesture seemed so utterly in contrast with her hasty back-away from me that I was puzzled. I said :

"Mrs. Cuffley-Evans—"

"I think you had better call me Clare," she requested.

"Good! Cuffley-Evans is a mouthful. People who like me call me Gar' or Trenton; people who hate me call me Garway."

She nodded but didn't comprehend.

I explained: "Women, I mean!"

She realised then that I was joking.

"Now about getting you home," I began. Clare Cuffley-Evans spun round.

"You don't seriously think we can go now, do you?" she interjected.

"Well, I thought, perhaps, down the backstairs and . . ."

"Surely you can't be serious? You are being watched I'm sure."

"More than that, they keep trying to give me the deep six."

"The what?"

"Fix me for a wooden overcoat—crease me," I explained.

"Exactly! If they find out I've seen you, my husband is as good as dead!"

"But you came in here, you must have been followed then?" I challenged.

"That I doubt," Clare replied. "As I explained I took precautions. You see, I came in a large laundry basket," she explained.

"Now *you're* not serious!" I spluttered.

"With the rest of the laundry—the clean laundry, Mr. Trenton, I mean, Garway," she corrected herself, "and tomorrow I shall leave in the dirty laundry."

"But—but—?" I yammered.

"It's all perfectly simple. Lots of things are simple in Tangier—if you have the money."

"I see. Pretty ingenious. But are you sure you haven't been double-crossed?"

"Absolutely sure. So you see, Mr. Trent—I mean, Garway, until the laundry is collected in the morning, I must stay here tonight."

The idea was a tolerable one. But Clare was a step—maybe two ahead of me.

"You, my dear Garway, had better take one of the pillows and a coverlet and sleep in the bath." Clare suggested.

"Ta ever so!" I retorted.

She looked at me and I think there was a twinkle in her eye, for she said:

"I wouldn't want you to take too seriously the analogy of the arrival of the clean laundry this evening and the departure of the sullied tomorrow, to have any significance or parallel, Mr. Trenton," she said.

"Ouch!" I said, pretending to flinch.

"Goodnight, Garway," she said, crossing to me and taking my hand, "and thank you." I grinned fatuously at her.

"Good night, Mrs. Cuffley-Evans."

"Clare!" she corrected.

"Clare."

"We stood very close and then, impulsively, she put her hand up to my face and touched it. The wrist-locket knocked against my cheek. The locket was cold. I wasn't, and I wasn't so sure about Mrs. Cuffley-Evans. I wasn't sure at all.

I collected my pillow and some cushions from the sofa and retired to the bathroom.

"Leave the door ajar," Clare said. "Just in case I need you."

"No comment!" I retorted. I undressed, placing my clothes carefully on the you-know-what. At the hand basin I washed all over and dried myself, rubbed my gums with my forefinger and once more thought of Clare's nice teeth. Then I lay in the bath. It wasn't long enough for me and I lay in a semi-seated position. I called out:

"Are you all right, Mrs. Evans? No need of any assistance? No suspicious sounds? No ominous footsteps in the corridor?"

"Sarcasm does not suit you, Garway," she called back. "Good night, Sir Galahad!"

"Sir Galahad?" I retorted wryly. "Not this time! I'm more like that chappie in Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, the one who was 'alone and palely loitering'," I explained.

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci, Keats," Clare imparted.

"Thank you, Clare. If I smoked a cigar, would it bother you?" I enquired. There was no reply. It appeared that Mrs. Cuffley-Evans, Clare, had fallen into a deep sleep.

As I lay there smoking a cigar, I had to smile sardonically. The situation was bizarre all right; there I was, nude in the bath, there was Mrs. Cuffley-Evans in my bed, and between us, on the table, there was husband Captain Cuffley-Evans' finger, in a box.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I WAS awakened at dawn from my cramped position in the bath by a low-key, insistent tapping. I jumped out and, seizing my revolver, I tiptoed very swiftly into the bedroom and reached the door. A voice whispered from the bed and I stood stock still. In the surprise of the moment I had forgotten Clare Cuffley-Evans. She whispered :

"Mr. Trenton ! Garway ! That will be Hassan and the laundry man. I suggest you put some clothes on or I am afraid Hassan will fear the worst !"

To hurry back to the bathroom— all nude—would look even more idiotic than the sedate saunter I adopted. I could hear Clare trying to stifle her laughter. I put on my trousers whilst the tapping became louder, more determined. I strapped the revolver holster on, put on a shirt and went back, Mauser in hand, gently unlocked the door and swiftly opened it wide. A small Moor, in a djellabah and fez, leapt back in alarm. Behind him, a very tall friend, similarly clad, scurried down the corridor. I thought if there is anyone shadowing us from a nearby bedroom they wouldn't have wished for a more amateurish job from us. I groaned, then motioned the stooges in with my revolver.

"Are these the boyos?" I enquired of Clare.

"Yes, but there's no need to frighten them to death, man !" she retorted. She whispered something in Arabic to them and calmed them while, having got them in, I re-locked the door.

"You are quite sure these blokes are to be trusted?" I asked.

"Completely. This is Hassan, he's been devoted to us for years. And his cousin Mustafa. Mustafa is with the laundry company."

Mrs. Cuffley-Evans stepped into the laundry basket.

"Mustafa will take me home, on his normal round. Once

at home I will carry on my normal day-to-day routine, shopping, and so on. How will you contact me?"

"I'll ring you from Gib after I've thought up a scheme," I told her.

"You'd better be someone else then," she suggested.

"All right." I thought for a second. "How about Uncle Harry?"

Clare nodded.

"My handbag please, Gar', and . . ." she indicated the sinister little box containing the finger which was on the table. I fetched it for her. As she took it from me, she said : "You won't let me down?"

"Scarpa? Run like hell?" I looked down at the box. "No, mam," I said, giving her the verbal regal or cowboy salute. "These boyos have made me hopping mad. I'll rescue your husband somehow."

She smiled then, impulsively, kissed my cheek. Up till then I had not thought of her as a particularly impulsive character.

"Cheers, Clare!" I said. "Good luck!"

"Good luck to you, Gar'," she said.

The stooges and I closed up the basket. I looked fiercely at Hassan I said, hoping he understood : "If anything happen to Mem Sahib I find you and kill you."

Hassan was not afraid.

"If anything happen Mis' Evans, I keel *myself*!" he assured me. I believed him.

I unlocked the door and, checking that the corridor was empty, moved out to the elevator, the boys following, breathing heavily as they carried the basket.

When I reached the lift, Hassan shook his head, indicating that we should proceed farther along the corridor. Here was a service lift. This they entered.

"Bye bye, Clare!" I said to myself, for fear we might be observed. I winked at Hassan and, as they descended, I turned to go back to my room just in time to see a pyjamaed figure quickly closing the door to a nearby room.

Well, if we had been observed, now was the time to scotch any interference. I had replaced the Mauser in the holster

under my armpit, concealed by my shirt. I rushed forward to the door and tapped authoritatively on it. In a moment a moon-faced European peered out. He was about forty-five, wore spectacles and was bald. He wore gay pyjamas which somehow looked wrong on him. Before he could say 'Mara-keesh', I had pushed past him and closed the door behind us.

There was a high-pitched scream from a particularly rotund Egyptian woman who was dressed ready to depart. I crossed to the woman quickly and ordered her to desist, producing the Mauser. This only brought forth a renewed shriek. I pointed the revolver at the man, indicating that he should try and gag her squealing. He became panicky and made for the door. I leapt for it, getting there a step behind him. I quickly shot my foot out and shut the door with a bang. The combination of the fat Egyptian woman's squeals and the door slam proved too much for the person in the next room. There was a torrent of abuse and heavy protesting thumps on the wall. I turned back to shush the woman. Her partner, the hero, who had made a dive for the door, produced from his pyjama breast pocket a large gold watch on a chain, this he held up to me as an offering, pleadingly: "Do not keel us, Monsieur," he said, "take all I 'ave. Including the lady, if you so desire 'er."

"Good grief! Nicc talk!" I retorted. "Are you a man or a rat?"

"Do not keel us," pleaded the little man. "Think of my wife and seven babies!" he said.

I gasped at this. "Uh? Then who in heck is this?" I enquired. I put the Mauser away and the rotund lady stopped squawking. The chunky chap, sweating profusely, looked at me with a sickly grin.

"You are, I am sure, M'sieur, a man of the world. . . ." he said ingratiatingly.

Then I realised why he had been peeping out into the corridor.

"I see!" I exclaimed. "You were pushing little orphan Annie off—out into the cruel snow?"

"Snow, M'sieur, in Tangier?"

"A figure of speech, Casanova. I can see I owe you an apology." I walked to the door. In great surprise the couple exchanged glances.

"Well, cheer-ho! Sorry for the intrusion!"

"You do not want our valuables?" the little man asked.

"No. No valuables. Good luck, sport!"

"You came to rob, now you give blessing?" The little man was overwhelmed - to coin a phrase.

"I have not seen you—you have not seen me—comprenez? Entente cordiale?"

"M'sieur, what can I say?" asked the little man, blissfully.

"Nothing, Monsieur. Do not think that we British are as cold as they would have you believe. *Madame est formi!* Vive le sport!"

I clicked my heels, bowed and hurried out.

Any disappointment I may have suffered during the night had not impaired my appetite. I ordered the French-type breakfast they normally serve in those parts, coffee, brioches or croissants with butter, and, though the coffee was mostly chicory, the Morrish pastries are something. I tucked in.

I made a great to-do of settling my bill. Affluently I tipped the staff and told the desk clerks I had greatly enjoyed my stay. I had just stepped into Ming II when Major Swinley appeared.

"Mornin', Trenton," he said. "Thought I'd give you a cruiser escort to the docks."

"I thought you were probably Royal Marines, Major," I said. "We had some of your lot with us when I was dicing with death."

"Carriers?"

"Yes."

"TBRs?"

"Now do I look the bomber-type? Dependable, reliable?"

"Can't say," Major Swinley replied.

We drove slowly along the Avenue d'Espagne, the way to the port. It was a glorious day, white caps on the sea, bluey-

green, inviting, and just enough breeze to stir the palm trees that lined the road.

"I'm sorry to be leaving," I told my escort.

He refrained from comment.

"Apart from the skulduggery, it's quite a tolerable place."

Again the Major remained silent.

"What about this chap of yours, Cuffley-Evans?" I asked him, carefully skirting round a cavalcade of trotting donkeys, laden with sandalwood, being driven up to the *Succo Pico*.

"The people behind the drug trafficking are immensely tricky and utterly inhuman," Major Swinley said. "I don't think we'll see or hear from Cuffley-Evans again, poor fellow."

"But aren't you doing something—aren't you going to try?" I asked. The Major looked at me coolly.

"Don't be a chump, Trenton," he said.

"Meantime, I suppose Mrs. Cuffley-Evans doesn't know a thing about it," I said, knowing the answer.

"Who said there was a Mrs. Cuffley-Evans?" the Major replied. I was about to tell him that he could lay off the double-talk when I remembered just in time. But he had thrown a doubt in my mind. A couple, in fact. Was the *soi-disant* Clare Cuffley-Evans a front, as phoney as the original Mr. Tagore? And how much did Major Swinley and his Interpol chaps know about my nocturnal cavortings? Had he, in fact, had me followed and, if so, how much did his 'busies' know? I thought perhaps a change of subject wouldn't be amiss. I remarked:

"I'm sorry to be leaving."

"You have already said so," the Major retorted drily.

I wasn't sorry to say goodbye to Major Swinley. Nor was it because he was a Royal Marine. Yet. I reasoned, he probably had no use for the excitable amateur sharing in his world of cold, factual, analytical detection of crime.

He waited until all the formalities had been completed and the Aston and I were aboard the ferry for Gibraltar.

"Ding Ho!" I winked at him from the deck rail. He raised one finger halfway to his panama.

"Cheers!" he said and abruptly turned and marched off.

"I'll have a drink for you at the *Goat*!" I called out. It is a pretty exclusive Naval Club in Bond Street. I doubted if he was a member but I thought the more I attracted attention to my departure, the better. To my surprise, maybe playing the same game, Major Swinley called back. His voice, Bashan-like, could be heard well above the ferry's throbbing engines. "Pink gin, please!" he called out.

I grinned. "I had a feeling it would be!" I yelled.

The water creamed as we made the turn into the Straits. I turned towards the Rock, thinking of Browning's famous poem in his old age *Home-Thoughts, from the Sea* :

"'Nobly, nobly Cape Saint Vincent to the North-west died away,' " I murmured.

"'Sunset ran, one glorious blood-red, reeking into Cadiz Bay;

Bluish mid the burning water, full in face Trafalgar lay;
In the dimmest North-East distance, dawned Gibraltar,
grand and grey. . . .'"

I thought of Clare Cuffley-Evans prompting my quotation from Keats the previous evening and had to chuckle. I was becoming quite 'arty' spouting poetry upon the *oddest* occasions.

But my chuckles did not disturb the elderly Moor next to me at the rail, still looking back at the fast receding Moroccan coastline. A gnarled old man with more lines on his face than Clapham Junction Station, in a fawn coloured djellabah and a royal blue and white turban; with hands clasped he looked back at Tangier, piled up square houses seemingly stacked one on top of the other, off-whites, creams, pinks, sandalwood browns, silver browns, but mostly whites, with here and there the golden towers of the mosques.

I wondered why the oldster was leaving. A large bundle of his possessions lay on the deck by his sandalled feet.

He looked skywards and said one word : "Maktub."

There was philosophy, patience, the acceptance of the Will of Allah in this. It was one of the few things I could translate. It meant : "It is written."

CHAPTER TWELVE

MY MAUSER once again under my panama, I passed through the Customs at Gibraltar. It was fortunate that I had placed it there: the Customs johnny was again no Aston Martin enthusiast and he went through the car and my suitcases very thoroughly. Having no official standing with the Interpol boys, I had to lump this.

I checked in at the Rock Hotel and promptly put in a call to Ginger Bier, my Fleet Air Arm matey, who was no doubt sitting at his desk in the city, feet up, seemingly reading *The Times*, but with a novelette tucked neatly away from prying eyes in the centre of its august pages.

There was an hour's delay to London so I had the bath I missed the previous evening and shaved, then rang Clare. The chances of the line from Gib to London being tapped I felt were remote, but I wasn't so sure about Gib to Tangier. I was a bit guarded when a man's voice answered, then I recognised it as that of the faithful Hassan. I said: "I wish to speak to Mrs. Cuffley-Evans. Is she in?"

Hassan said: "Who is that, please?"

"This is her Uncle Harry speaking," I replied.

"One moment, sir, please."

There was a pause and then Clare came on the telephone.

"Yes?"

"Hallo, my dear!" I said in a bluff voice that I suspected fooled no one; but it was worth a try.

"Uncle, darling! How *are* you? How nice to hear you!" Clare said, entering into the spirit of the thing and—I thought—doing a darn sight better acting job than me.

"So you are home!" I said.

"Yes."

"I'm so glad you were in."

"Me, too!"

"All O.K.?"

"Yes, Uncle, thank you—everything's fine," she replied. I wondered if she would say anything about her missing husband? Whether she *ought* to? Whether they would suspect the call if she didn't? Clare too, had been thinking of this, for when I said :

"Peter O.K.?"

"I hope so," she said gaily, "I haven't heard from him for a day or two—but that often happens, Uncle, when he's busy."

"Yes, of course," I said, then chanced : "No other news?"

"No other news, Uncle." A pause, then : "Where are you?"

"I'm at Gib at the moment. Moving off soon. Just flown in B.E.A. from Malta. Thought I'd give you a call."

"Thank you, dear," she said.

I couldn't help it, I added :

"Hotel's all right, bathroom's a bit on the small size."

I heard her utter a slight exclamation at this. It could have been a suppressed chuckle. Then she asked :

"When will you ring me again, Nunky?"

I thought that 'Nunky' was a bit saucy.

I said : "Very soon, Clare dear. I'll be in touch. Good-bye now, dearest!"

I thought my Dearest was equally saucy. Then, as I thought of her awful predicament and the locket on her wrist, I felt, as often, the complete heel.

I ordered a vodka-on-the-rocks and lay on the bed smoking a Gauloise, figuring out a plan of campaign—or rather, two of them. A lot depended on the result of my call to Ginger Bier.

The 'phone call took longer than I had expected. I had killed the cigarette butt and buried the vodka and drowsed off when the strident ring of the 'phone bell had me off the bed and under it before you could say 'So much for reflex action.'

Shamefacedly and glad no one had observed my capers, I got up and answered it.

"Your London call, sir!" said one of the hotel telephonists.

The cheery voice of Ginger came over the wire. As always he was as exuberant as a porpoise.

"Gar'?" he shouted.

"Hallo, cock!"

Then he went into our ad-kidding routine.

"Have you a Little Lazy Lucy in your home? Does your little girl suffer from constipation? Try Lucy-Glow. Lucy-Glow gives complete comfort to your little ones when—"

"Oh, shut up, Ginger!" I said, "and listen. That's if you can hear me as well as I can you!"

"Yes, Trenton old trout. I can hear you loud and clear. Roger and over! By the way, who is 'Roger'?"

"You wicker basket! I bet you're sitting there with your secretary on your knee doing a little intricate dictation!" I accused.

"That's a nice thing to say! Suppose our telephonist is listening?" Ginger retorted.

"Her hair will stand on end by the time I've finished!" I said. It could have been my imagination, but I thought I heard an immediate click.

"Are you still with me, Catesby?" I asked Ginger. We called one another Catesby occasionally, after some lush villain in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, who seemed to be steeped in skulduggery.

"Yes, indeed!" Ginger replied, "you haven't telephoned to tell me you've married Fern La Verne, have you?"

"Not at all a bad idea, sport, but not yet."

"Did I do right by you old pal, old timer?"

"She's a weirdie, but she's wonderful!"

"That sounds like the lyric for a song."

"I'll sing it to her next time I see her," I imparted. "Now, hold on to your hat. I'm at Gib."

"Gib?"

"Yes, Gib. I suppose you couldn't take that Christmas holiday down in these yare parts, *now*?" I asked him.

"Uh?"

"Bury your favourite Uncle for a couple of days?"

"You in troub, dear boy?"

"Put it this way. Heap much plentee fun and games here. I think you'd enjoy it."

"Really?"

"Yep! And I sho' could use your invaluable services."

There was a short silence, then Ginger said: "Did you hear about my Poor Old Uncle Ned? A delightful character. Lived in Malaga. I'll be down to bury him before he gets too high."

"Nice work, cobber," I said. "Two small things. Bring that nice bottle of Indian ink with you—"

"Ah!" Ginger exclaimed significantly. "And—?"

"And see if you can bring Horace."

"Horace?"

"Yes. Go and see Mrs. Mertens. I know it may be tricky, but trot along and see a Mr. Shadrack . . ."

"Who?"

"A cove called Shadrack, as in--"

"Meshach, Abed-nego?"

"Check! He may be able to help. He may not. I don't know. He didn't help me but if he knows you are nipping out to helicopter me, he just might help on Horace."

"O.K. sport. Where does this biblically-named character hang out?"

I gave Ginger Mr. Shadrack's address, adding: "It's not more than a few yards from your ornate offices."

"I know it, just off Fenchurch Street," Ginger replied.

"That's it! Well, see you! I'll be wearing a light sten gun, so that you will recognise me!" I said.

"Are you at the *Rock*?"

"Yes."

Ginger chuckled: "Remember the time we were in *Victorious* and, as we reached Gib, you—"

"At umpteen pounds a minute I've no time to listen to your fallacious nonsense about our fictitious escapades in the F.A.A.," I cut in.

I could hear Ginger chuckling at the other end of the line.

"Pick up a note at the Hotel *Madrid*, Algeciras," I said, repeating it to be sure Ginger was 'hep'.

"Ding ho!" he retorted.

"By the way, give my love to Charity Stockton," I requested.

"You don't think I'd be such a cad as to see Charity with you out of the country, do you, sport?" Ginger said in a mock-hurt tone.

"Yes, sport, I do!" As he chuckled again I hung up on him.

So, I was going back to Tangier and it was going to be Plan Number Two. Good! I wandered around my room, thinking out details. The idea of helping Clare Cuffley-Evans was very appealing. The idea of seeing Clare again was not without charm. Then, too, there was Fern La Verne.

I staged an elaborate and ostentatious departure from the hotel next morning which made some of the quieter guests at this crack hotel wince more than somewhat. I headed for Spain. Passing along the flat 'no-man's land' leading to La Linea, I kept checking in my mirror to see if I was being tailed, but it wasn't until I was on the road to Estepona that I found a Spanish car, a Pegaso, following me. I grinned and thought they really had made it very easy for me. I patted the outside of Ming II's white flank - the car door—and said: "O.K. gal, let's go."

I had just pulled away from the Pegaso when I noticed, coming up very fast behind him, a 190 SL Merc. And it was galloping. I had fooled myself. I should have realised these chumsies wouldn't be so asinine as to try and tail me with a car that couldn't keep up. I trod hard on the accelerator thankful that I had fitted the latest twin plug cylinder head and the Aston simply leapt away. When I had completely lost my Merc. tailers, I swung off left, round the Bay to Algeciras. The assumption would be that I had moved up to Malaga. Just how long or careful the pursuers would be was doubtful. They clearly had advised their La Linea contacts to make sure that I *did* head for England, Home and Beauty. A great deal depended on the thoroughness of the laddies tailing me. I was practically a write-off anyway and, even if they were able to know that I had turned off the

Malaga road and, instead, made for Algeciras, I would have quite a start.

I zoomed towards Algeciras, every now and then peering back in the mirror, but of the Merc. there was no sign.

At Algeciras I drove up to the back of the Hotel *Madrid* and checked in. As soon as the luggage was out of the car, I hurried it into the hotel garage.

I crossed to the hotel and engaged a large room. When my luggage came up I didn't bother to open it but I wrote a note for Ginger and, going downstairs, I paid for the room in advance and said that my friend would be checking in and to be sure to give him the note.

I sauntered out into the main drag and located a good garage. I wanted a car to take me back to Gib. They weren't able to supply it but they put me in touch with a firm that could. I didn't go back to the hotel, I had all I needed, a British passport and a German revolver. A singing Spaniard drove me back to Gibraltar. I was uneasy, apprehensive, for a while because of my experience in the phoney Doctor Tagore's chariot, but Juan or Gomez (I forget which), was just a happy Spaniard. At Gib he drove me straight down to the docks. I had quite a wait, but I had made it.

I paid him and tipped him handsomely (it was a worthwhile if expensive idiosyncrasy of mine; you never knew when you might need the recipient again).

I walked off the ferry at Tangier and, avoiding taxis, went up towards the Casbah. I had noticed a modest hotel near the Grand Succo. Before I went in, I bought a canvas hold-all and a batch of newspapers and a paper-back copy of Pierre Closterman's *The Big Show*. Finding a convenient quiet corner, I crumpled up the newspapers and filled my hold-all with them, giving the impression that the hold-all contained my worldly possessions. I went into a chemist's and purchased a razor, soap, toothbrush and toothpaste. I felt I was a millionaire. I checked in at the *Fabien*.

I was about to telephone Clare, then I changed my mind. It was all right for Nunky Ned to ring from Gib en route to London Airport, but if her 'phone *was* tapped, my local call

could and would be traced. I thought of an alternative plan. Meantime, as they didn't have the luxury of private baths at the *Fabien*, I had to go down the corridor for my dip. One of the things I like about wealth is that it often gives you a private bath. I permitted myself a giggle as I carried my sponge bag to the bathroom. In it, of course, was the Mauser.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SOMEHOW I was glad to be back in Tangier. It could be that the jolly old adrenalin was working overtime at the thought of imminent danger—was it exciting because it was verboten? The forbidden fruit so delectably sweeter than that on one's own tree . . . was I also subconsciously thinking of Clare Cuffley-Evans? If so I was a knave and a villain and a few other things besides. . . .

The small hotel *Fabien* overlooked the Grand Succo—the fantastic market square on one side, the Casbah side, the tall, dignified minaret of the mosque, where the Muezzin called the Faithful to pray five times a day. Towards the westernised part of the town there were a cinema and modern shops and to the left a cluster of native shops selling water melons and charcoal, hand-woven carpets, sandalwood furniture, copper and brass utensils and, of course, many leather goods; and a number of Moroccan cafés where shrouded, sun-tanned men, their faces lined, often bearded, stared out steadfastly from under the hoods of their burnouses, in their hands the steaming glasses of mint tea. One group, on their haunches, were clustered round a story-teller, gesticulating, dramatic, he spun his tales for which he was paid on the spot—I thought, whereas we were in the same trade, he didn't have to wait for royalty cheques to roll in or get deduction for I'.A.Y.E. or any of these irritating, new de-hydraters; he spouted and he collected—not a bad idea, at that !

In the centre of the Succo, in the shadow of the trees, were the itinerant vendors of pottery and of flowers. Big, proud-looking Berber women who were unveiled, and gesticulating, arguing, laughing, berating, jerring, were the noisy crowds, the polyglot population of this fascinating city, and, as I was to learn, always to be heard somewhere in the background 'music' of this cacophonous conversation, the tinnabulation of the water-sellers. I badly wanted to venture

forth—I realised I needed a clean shirt—but I thought it would be wiser to wait till nightfall.

To pass away the time I read the paper-backed Pierre Clostermann—wonderful reading—and, as soon as it was dark, I set forth. I made my way across the square to the cinema where I caught up with a Bardot flick that I had missed in London the previous year. This filled in a useful couple of hours. The audience had a great time. After the final fade-out I then made my way towards the Casbah, passing the little shops of the local merchants—still doing a brisk business, despite the late hour, selling everything from locks and keys to leather pouffes, slippers, combs and buttons of all sizes and colours. I reached the Casbah where I had learned that it was wiser, if you were a tourist, to visit in the daylight and with established guides; but I had considered this would be about the safest place for me to dine. In any case, I had always wanted an authentic Arab meal. The recent upsurge in patriotism meant that I was often jostled and frequently scowled at, but I paid no regard and, when I reached the *El Magreb*, I was greeted most civilly and enjoyed the national dish, *cous-cous*, for which, from my ‘gen’ books, I had learned that to be the little gent I should only use three fingers of my right hand. It was irrelevant that I wondered what happened if you were left handed, and not so irrelevant when I wondered which of Cuffley-Evans’s fingers had been returned. Till then I had been enjoying the *cous-cous*. People are of the opinion that because they eat with their fingers, Moroccans are dirty. They couldn’t be cleaner. Bodily cleanliness is paramount to the Moor. One of the Islamic rules is that one should bathe in clean, running water; and, though it is strange to us, soap and water and towels clean more thoroughly than the softest of papers. By now I considered it would be all right to stooge along to the *Juany*.

I crossed the Square, pausing to pat several humble donkeys tethered under the trees. I have a special affection for the humble little donkey with its delicate little feet and air of sadness. I like to think, when it departs, the donkey goes

to a particularly green Elysian field. I wished the Italians liked cats more than they do, and the Arab world were kinder to donkeys. I thought of the excellent job the S.P.A.N.A. people—the Society for Protection of Animals in North Africa—did and wished I'd win the Pools to help them more!

As I made my way through the groups of locals out of the Casbah, it perplexed me that I should be thinking of kindness to animals instead of humans—what an indictment of me—or the human race! So I mentally added tolerance to mothers-in-law as a gesture. I was smiling at my idiotic mental kaleidoscope when I suddenly noticed, standing outside the *El Minzah* hotel, the upright figure of Major Swinley. He was waiting for someone. I was about to dodge back and go by a more circuitous way to the *Juany* via the *Velasquez* hotel when, to my utter astonishment, Clare Cuffley-Evans drove up in a taxi, got out and was instantly greeted by the Major, who paid off the taxi. I was very surprised to see Clare with the Major. They were going to have drinks at the *El Minzah* or dine there. And I would dearly have loved to stroll in and sit alongside. Instead, now that the coast was clear, I hurried past the *El Minzah* and went up to the Boulevard Pasteur, and along to the *Juany*.

After the *fracas* on my last visit, I thought the manager might try to bar me, but he merely nodded when I walked in. I suppose he was used to a certain amount of rough-and-tumble.

I wrote a note to Fern La Verne and drank whisky on the rocks until she came on and did her stuff. Though I had seen the act before, to me, she still had magic and it was interesting to see the chaps at various tables—French, English, Pakistanis—giving her the 'business' as she sang.

After she had taken her final curtain, she came across to me, still in her 'stage' make-up and, even before she sat down, said:

"I thought you'd gone!"

I grinned: "What will you drink?"

"Dry Martini," she replied. "Very dry."

"Trying to be sophisticated?"

"Meaning?"

"Americans think it very smart to have a very dry Martini. In some bars now they just plop the olive into neat gin. The whole idea of a Martini is to put Martini in it!" I said.

"Dry Martini," she paid no regard and said to the waiter, "very dry."

"You're just cussed," I said.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she demanded.

"I'm a big game hunter," I retorted, "Lion and all that."

"Are there lions in North Africa?" she enquired.

"I don't know. I read they had pig-sticking in a tourist blurb—sounds frightfully pukka, doesn't it?"

"'Veddy Briddish'!" Fern said sarcastically, adding: "Dontcherkneow, cheeriow old bean, cheerieow!"

"I adore your idea of British slang," I said, as the waiter brought her her drink. "Those expressions went out with hooped skirts."

Fern ignored this. "So you've come back to hunt lions?"

"No—not lions, unicorns," I replied.

"Uh?"

"The way," I said "to catch a unicorn—at least, in mediæval days, they *believed* the way to catch a unicorn was to sit a young girl of great purity in a lovely place where the unicorn lived."

"Well, you can count me out for a start!"

"The unicorn would come along and rest his head gently on her lap. That's when you grabbed him."

"It sounds like a pretty mean trick."

"That's what I thought. But I suppose all's fair in love or war."

"I don't know about war!" Fern retorted.

"And love?"

"I'm not sure about love," Fern replied. "Cigarette me!" she requested.

I did so.

"There are a few pigs I could stick!" she said abruptly.

"Talking of love?"

"Talking of love."

"Tell me."

She looked at me steadfastly. "So you've come back to catch unicorns," she said. "O.K. Don't tell me."

I beckoned to the waiter to set up more drinks. "Fern, I've got a job for you to do for me," I said, dropping the bantering tone.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" she replied sarcastically.

"This is serious." I looked round the night club. The tables, as always in these clip-joints, were far too close. I said: "I'll see you home."

"'Home'." She repeated the word with great scorn. "'Home'."

"I'll tell you at your apartment." I corrected it.

"Keep your hat on, Buster," she retorted, "you won't be staying long."

"What a rude little girl," I replied.

Fern got up to go and change. I stood up.

"Don't forget what happened to Buster," she said as a parting shot. I vaguely remembered some American jingle — "How did it go? 'Nothing became of Buster, nothing, nothing at all?'"

"Darn right. *Nothing*. So don't expect too much."

"Goodbye, Miss Chips!" I said. She hesitated for a moment. Then I realised she hadn't completely understood the joke, and that the nearest to Chips would be chippie, and that wouldn't be nice, and she was about to be furious and changed her mind.

We left via the small staff door and walked a little way.

"What's the matter, Trenton?" she enquired. "You're acting kinda cagey."

"To tell you the truth," I imparted, "after I'd been shot out last time I saw you home, a party of jokers tried hard to crease me."

"Crease you? It sounds lewd."

"Crease—eliminate—destroy."

"You mean kill?"

"I mean kill."

"How come?"

I told her the story.

"But why should they want to—to crease you?"

"It's a long story, Fern, and I don't know all of it," I replied.

"Is that why you came back?"

"Yes, and, of course, to see you!"

"In your Scotch!" she said, cryptically.

"Charming!" I retorted.

I hailed a passing taxi and got into it, giving Fern's address. My hand stole to my holster, under my right arm pit. Fern noticed this.

"Why the Napoleon act?" she enquired.

"Never mind that now. I just like to take precautions."

Fern nodded: "I like a guy to take precautions," she averred in a dead-pan manner. The trouble was one couldn't be sure when Fern was being serious.

The trip was uneventful. I paid off the taxi, but waited in it until Fern had opened the front door of the apartment, then unheroically I dived in. Not so much, I must say in my defence, because I was afraid of being fired on as from a desire to remain incognito.

Fern's apartment was on the top floor. There was no carpet on the stairs and they creaked like a Victorian melodrama.

When we reached her flat, she unlocked the door and switched on the light in the lounge. I had my heart in my mouth when she did so and I swallowed hard in relief when we found the place empty.

"You sure are jittery," Fern said. "Want a drink?"

"Yes."

"What? Highball?"

"Tincture of some kind—embalming fluid, Scotch, anything."

She went to fix it. I looked out of the window, chiefly to check the house opposite. It seemed O.K., but you never knew when some gay blade was going to stick the nose of a Beretta through the curtains and just blaze away. There

were a number of gay neon signs flashing on and off along the street. It seemed somewhat incongruous in this hot, tumultuous city.

"Now that I've seen 'Drink Coca Cola' in Arabic, I guess I've seen everything," I said to Fern, as she returned with the glasses and began to pour a Scotch.

"There's always Chinese," Fern said, adding, "O.K., Buster, what can I do for you, apart from slipping into something loose?"

"Such talk," I chided. "It's very simple," I took my whisky.

"Sorry, no ice."

"I've found plenty," I retorted.

"Wise guy!"

"I want you to take a message to a Mrs. Cuffley-Evans," I said. "I can't take it myself. I'm not supposed to be here."

"So you said."

"Will you do it?"

"Why not?"

"Good girl!" I thanked her, Fern's eyebrows went skywards at this expression, but she said nothing for a time. We drank in silence.

"I suppose amongst your treasures you haven't a man's shirt, sixteen neck?"

"Oh sure," Fern replied sarcastically. "Also a tuxedo for a fellow six feet two, BVIDs' for a circus midget and I've a nice line in flannel night shirts left by the last Kentucky daddy who stopped over. Suppose you give me the note for this Evans dame and start to wander?"

"My! My! You're the touchiest girl I've ever *not* touched," I said.

Fern turned away.

"I suppose you just might have had a man's shirt. You could have been—or are still married? I don't know anything about you. Remember?" I challenged her.

She gave me one of her special long, long appraising looks.

"O.K.," she said, "you asked for it."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SHE REFILLED my glass and taking a deep breath, she started talking "I come," she said, "from a small town in Iowa Did I say small? It's a pinhead Burlington Burlington, Iowa Stutz Street Man! That's a crappy street, if you'll pardon my French That Iowa stinks, but good!" Fern looked at me intently suddenly saying "Don't look so disgusted Don't you like the way I talk, old bean cheerio pip-pip!"

"Here we go again" I had to smile "I wonder why Americans think we say things like pip-pip?"

"All limeys do!" Fern accused

"I told you these expressions went out with the Charleston!" I replied "Get on with your story!"

"Not unless you take that smirky look off your pan!" Fern retorted

"It's by way of admiration for the graphic way you talk"

"Nuts!" Fern replied succinctly, continuing "Dad worked in a cardboard box factory that was O.K. It didn't seem to pay him much though The difficulty was Ida Ida was Dad's second wife She didn't like me or the other two children by Dad's first marriage And we kids hated our stepmother All the time there were rows Whenever Dad came back from work, he would find that I'd had a beating or Maybelle was crying Stepmother did not seem to be able to produce a kid for him maybe that made her bitter, maybe that was why he took to drinkin' In that atmosphere we were brought up"

"How old were you all?"

"I was seventeen Dick fifteen, Maybelle twelve," Fern replied "Finally we couldn't take it any more We decided to escape Dick and Maybelle would go to Kansas, where they knew Aunt Ada would look after them I was going after a career I had theatre talent—so Mortimer Afis one of the teachers, said Mortimer Afis was forever talking of Thespi,

or Roscius and the Muses. He was our English master."

"Quite a name."

"Oh, Morty was a character. He was mad about toy theatres (and seeing his mother changing her clothes, so he once told me). Mr. Mortimer, he sho' lived for the theatre. He spent his spare time putting on plays and things—me and Dick and Maybelle were in everything - it kept us out of our unhappy home. Mr. Mortimer Als said that I had this talent, he once asked my stepmother if I had any hereditary talent—is that the right word?" I nodded.

"Stepmother enlightened him about that. Hereditary or no, when I sang, people listened. When I was in a play, people watched. Mr. Mortimer Als said I would go far. I intended to. Right to the Pacific!" Fern drew on her cigarette and blew the smoke out in one big puff. "Say! Am I boring you?" she enquired.

"Not yet," I replied. "Go on, Fern."

She continued: "We simply had to get out of Burlington. We resorted to trickery. We did terrible things—we even stole from the Church collection. We took a penny here and there, when we were sent shopping. We sang in the streets, now and then getting a nickel from a dope with a kind heart. Nor was this all. Marie Brunelle was the daughter of the richest man in Burlington. At school, in her locker, was a money box. It was downright theft, but we needed escape more than honesty."

Fern drew on the cigarette and let out the smoke dramatically at the same time as she said: "We swiped that box. In it was twelve fifty and two bits!" She looked at me to see how I had taken this news. "I sent it back later, limey," she told me.

I nodded briefly. I believed her. "Go on," I said.

"Dick and Maybelle reached Aunt Ada, chiefly by thumbing lifts. Aunt Ada kept them, and when Dad arrived to take them home, she, too, repaid Marie Brunelle's money box herself, and was even more threatening than he was, and Dad went away quietly to his cardboard box factory and his second wife, leaving the kids unmolested. It made for peace,

anyway. I arrived in Los Angeles, caught a street car up to Hollywood Boulevard and, stepping off it at Vine and Hollywood Boulevard, I found a small town with Five and Ten cent stores, soda fountains, certainly no studios. The street-car conductor, noticing my darting eyes, I guess, and the tacky suitcase, and my Sunday best, said: 'Nearest studio is on Gower—an' that's quite a walk, kid.' It wasn't contempt, I guess he said the same thing so often to so many kids."

"So?"

"So I got a room on Sefton. I checked into number 1743½. The landlady had a vacant small room, seven-fifty a week and use of the bathroom. In the next room was a school mistress, on vacation from Omaha. On the floor below, a girl who worked at the Kress Store, stationery counter. In the room next to her a young guy who did extra work. They all, including the holidaying school mistress, wanted to star in pictures."

"Now there was one more!"

"Yeah! I hadn't specified in my prayers that I should star in movies. Presumably when Mr. Mortimer Afis said I had theatre ability, it covered the movies. I dunno. It was just that the distance, and the idea of the California coast, appealed to me. It never occurred to me then that I would not get into the studios. Anyway, the other kids were doing movie work, so I thought I would."

"I know what followed," I said. "There followed several days of utter bewilderment. The studios, mostly a 'bus ride from the main streets, were impregnable. The casting departments referred you to the Extras Guild, Central Casting. The Extras Guild membership was full. By now you had no money and the extra who roomed at—what was it—1743½? who had just had five days in a row at Burbank, took you out to eat, still in his studio make-up, then not very deliberately explained that he would call on you that night."

"Mister, you hit it sock on the boko! At least there were locks on the doors at 1743½ Sefton. The extra was very angry. He let it be understood that I had eaten his food under false pretences."

I laughed.

"By now," Fern continued, "the landlady was pressing for her seven dollars-fifty for the room. I was hungry. Talent or no, I began to wash dishes at a delicatessen near Columbia Studios. The nearest I got to the picture business was when I took the freshly-washed dishes from the scullery into the delicatessen, where a cowboy or two from a Columbia 'B' film sat munching gefilter fish, like me, awaiting a studio call."

Apart from the frustrated extra, the other boarders, unified by their mutual desire to get into pictures, were friendly and helpful, Fern said: the girl from the Kress Stores knew a man who knew someone at Central Casting and they allowed Fern a union card. Then the school mistress from Omaha, the days drawing nearer to the end of her vacation, and hopes that she would be spotted by a talent scout beginning to fade, decided on a daring gamble. She would go to the Beverly Hills Brown Derby and lunch with the élite. Everyone knew that the big executives, the stars and the important agents lunched at the Beverly Derby. She considered asking the extra to escort her, but the girl from Kress, who knew about these things, said that it was conceivable that the extra might be recognised by a director and that would be disastrous; the social scale in Hollywood was more rigid than any regal court. The girl from Kress, next on the list, since she had first befriended the Omaha school marm, could not get the day off for the grand occasion. And so the choice fell on Fern.

"And so," Fern continued, "chaperoned by me, in the Kress girl's borrowed finery, Miss Omaha sat at a centre table in the Brown Derby, surrounded by the famous in the side booths reserved for the important people. Nor were we kids pleased when a friendly waiter pointed out the celebrities! Well, we lingered over our lunch and talked at one another and looked over each other's shoulders. No one approached except, of course, the waiter and he, finally, with the check. It was a big check, at that. And so we waited outside the Derby for a 'bus to take us back to Vine and

Hollywood Boulevard, now too fed up to talk. We changed 'buses and rode up to Sunset. Here, as if to postpone our return to Sefton Street, the school marm suggested that we take a coffee at the Sunset drive-in. It was here that the miracle happened."

I hazarded a guess. 'A talent scout?"

"Not exactly, but a guy called Al Murphy, Assistant Casting Director at the San Fernando Studios, had been over to Columbia to look at a few feet of a Western which his friend and opposite number there had arranged to be run off for him. He wanted a 'heavy' for the part of the crooked sheriff in the next Tex North picture. He also needed a few 'bits' that were easy to cast. He liked the 'heavy' in the cut sequence he saw at Columbia and stopped off for a coke at the Drive-in. It was here that he saw me sitting on a high stool with my friend next to me. I guess I was exactly what he had in mind for a bit part in the saloon bar scene, for he slipped out of his car and crossed to us.

"'Hallo', he said to us.

"'On your way, Mister', Miss Omaha said, giving him a prissy brush-off.

"'Take it easy, this isn't a pick-up.'

"'Oh,' I said sarcastically, 'pardon us! Federal dick, huh?"

"'Never mind the wisecracks,' he had said. 'I'm Al Murphy, Assistant Caster at San Fernando.'

"We gasped.

"'What did you say?"

"'You kids in movies?' he asked us.

"'Oh yes, sure,' we replied.

"'He nodded at me. 'You O.K. on dialogue?"

"'Dialogue?' I gasped.

"'Yeah. You had any lines in pictures? You ever said anything?' he asked me. My pal was no mug.

"'Sure,' she butted in. 'Fern's just had five days at U-I playing a hat check girl for Arthur Lubin.'

"'Five days!' Murphy was impressed. You know at San Fernando they sometimes shot a complete film in five days. 'Is that right?' he asked me, 'Are you in movies?"

"'Sure!' I said. I had the temerity and sense to confirm this.

"'You look sorta sad. You wanna work over to San Fernando?' he asked me.

"'Yes. Do I!' I replied. I guess I was too eager, he asked me suspiciously: 'You gotta Central Casting card?'

"'Of course,' I said, producing it.

"'O.K. You'll be on the Tex North set. Cabaret singer in a Yukon saloon,' he told me. I sure was pleased. 'Oh I can do that standing on my head,' I told him.

"'We don't want any alfalfa. No corn,' he told me. 'You get this 'cos you look the type, see. Sorta sad.'

"'But how about my friend?' I asked Murphy.

"'Talk sense!' Murphy replied. 'If all the girl friends of all the girls working in movies got jobs on the set, how in hell would we get on 'em to shoot 'em?' Murphy said. He moved away and Omaha began to laugh, and then, quite suddenly, she burst into tears, poor kid," Fern said softly.

"'Didn't you see her again?'

"'Nope. I wonder what happened to her?' she ruminated.

"'She probably wondered what happened to you!' I said. 'You didn't become a film star, did you?'

Fern looked at me contemptuously. "Be your age," she said. "My wonderful break, my chance, took place on the Yukon set as Al Murphy had arranged. In a sequin dress and holding a large fan, I was placed near the piano. To my astonishment, when it came to singing, they used someone else's voice, already recorded on a sound track, and all I had to do was to synchronise my voice to hers. I sure was sore, but, at the piano, also playing to play-back, was a young pianist who had a small club off Cherokee. In between 'takes' the director let him play popular numbers, among them a number I liked called *Sensational You* and I sang it softly and the pianist kinda liked it. That's all.

"'If I expected immediate recognition, contracts and all that, I sure was disappointed. In the finished picture all that was seen of me was in the background of a panning shot which brought Tex North into the saloon and across to the

bar. There was no follow-up movie, no interest, no more work," Fern said.

"Hollywood can be like that," I said. "So you went back to washing dishes at the delicatessen?"

"Yes. Then, one day, the pianist who had been on the set at San Fernando rang me. His singer at his small club wanted the week-end off to go to Agua Caliente, to get married, would I pinch-hit a couple of nights? Would I!"

"And fame and fortune followed!"

"Yeah? Though this piano playing guy liked me, they all talked. I guess I hadn't got presence."

"You do have now!"

"Maybe; anyway I tried for a variety of jobs and eventually landed that of hat check girl at the *Hong Kong* on the smart strip section of Beverly Hills. A drunken producer, behaving like a big ape, had me fired. I worked two days at RKO (as a courtesan in a costume drama) and had no more work for three months. The landlady at 1734½ Sefton finally put the bar up, no more credit, and a nice young man had arrived from the East, college education and all that, and put down a fifty dollar bill, payment in advance. I was out!"

"You had quite a time in Sunny Cal!"

"Lucky for me it was sunny," Fern said. "For a time," she continued, "I slept in a car in one of them open car parks — till I was picked up for vagrancy. Ever hear of Lincoln Heights Jail?"

I nodded. As a writer I'd attended a night court there, for atmosphere. Maybe I'd even seen and heard Fern La Verne sentenced that evening. Truth is far stranger than fiction.

"I learned to sing at the Lincoln Heights Jail. All night long you got sad coloured girls singing—singing the blues! I came out with a sort of talent!"

"Ironic!"

"Yeah, like you said, ironic."

I had once worked in Hollywood. MGM had purchased one of my books and my agent had fixed it that part of the deal included a trip to California for me and that I would do a treatment for them of the book. I therefore knew that

Hollywood was a papier-maché town at the best of times, peopled with puppets. I soon learned that one should never take Hollywood seriously. Alas ! Fern had.

"They'd have shipped me back to Burlington if I had told the truth. Anything was preferable to that. Once you've been 'in' they keep you moving—to another State. I became the all-time champ wanderer!" Fern said. She took a deep draught of her whisky. "Never figured I'd find myself in a honky-tonk in Tangier !" she added.

"So that's why you can really sing Blues?"

"You don't seem to mind that I'm a tramp," Fern said.

"I'm a very tolerant guy!" I told her, taking her hand. For the first time in our acquaintance Fern didn't withdraw. Suddenly I tightened my grip on her hand.

"What was that?" I whispered.

I had heard the faintest of creaks on the floor boards. There was someone outside the door.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Cross to the light switch and turn it out then, when I say so, fling open the door and fall on the floor behind the door!" I whispered to Fern.

"Say! What is all this?" she complained. "I thought you said you were a writer."

"I am. I just happen to have a few side lines!" I quipped. "Hurry!"

As I talked I had moved a bowl of fruit, an ash tray, the glasses and the whisky bottle from the table and quickly put the table on its side. It was pretty useless—except possibly against a knife thrower; but then, who knew what my adversary or adversaries had. I took the Mauser out, released the safety catch and knelt behind the upturned table. I held the Mauser as steady as I could on the ledge of the table.

"O.K.!" I whispered to Fern. "Now!"

She switched off the light and flung open the door, dropping smartly to the deck. I was pleased with her performance.

The door swung open wide. Standing near the door was a sad-looking ginger cat. It miaowed.

"Well I'll be a Flying Ar—!"

"Is that you, Abdul?" Fern asked the newcomer.

"If Abdul's a thin, red-headed geezer that looks as if its had bad news, that's Abdul!" I said.

Fern laughed as she got to her feet and switched on the light.

'Talk about an anti-climax!'

"An-tie-climax is right!" I agreed, copying her American pronunciation of 'anti'.

"But man! you were touchy! And what's that nasty looking thing in your hand?"

"That nasty looking thing," I again copied her over the

word 'nasty', "happens to be a little toy called a revolver, gat or equaliser."

"Say," Fern challenged. "Who *are* you?"

"Never mind all that now. Your friend Abdul seems hungry."

"Abdul's always hungry. He reminds me of Ginger Bier a little—just the colouring, I mean," Fern said, going out into the kitchen, followed by the cat.

I put the Mauser away and uprighted the table, replacing the fruit bowl and glasses.

"Hey! This note you want me to take to this Cuffley what-was-her-name, is that all part of your shennannigan just now?" Fern called out from the kitchen. I hurried in there after her.

"Sh! Yes. But would you prefer to tannoy it? I'm sure several people at the *El Minzah* couldn't hear it!"

"What's so secret?" Fern asked, handing me a tin of sardines and a can opener.

"I am *persona non grata* here," I imparted.

"In basic American, what's that?"

"Guys are anxious to give me the deep six," I explained.

"I don't go much on baseball," Fern retorted.

"The deep six—six feet of clay!" I explained.

"Oh, eliminate you!"

"Check!"

"Well," Fern said, putting some sardines on a saucer for Abdul, "unless you are play-acting—and it seems a queer time for it—it figures. How much do you want to tell me? Are you a smuggler?"

"Nothing so romantic. But I'll tell you this, Fern, these *hombres* are thoroughly unpleasant characters. And plenty dangerous. So much so that it wouldn't surprise me at all if your other ginger friend turns up!" I said, stroking Abdul as he ate the sardines. Fern considered this for a moment.

"You mean you may need his help?"

"Right on the nail, sister, right on the veritable nail!" I replied.

Fern smiled. Something she did infrequently, but when it

happened, the room seemed to take on a saffron glow. It was a radiant smile, warm, breath-taking.

"You know," I said, "you've got a hell of a smile, Fern."

"Never mind the fancy passes," she retorted. "Why don't you teach me how to use that gat you've got? Maybe I could be of some use, too!"

That gal was tabasco!

I wrote a note to Clare from 'Uncle Harry', merely stating that I had arrived. Any moment now the 'other side' would contact Clare, so I also gave my proposed address—the *Bendinat* in Tétuan. Life at the moment seemed to be a series of hotels—and one night stands at that.

"You'll like Mrs. Cuffley-Evans," I told Fern. The name—so very British—made her smile.

"Eow oi si, dontcherknow, what-what!" she said jeeringly. "Eow do come and meet the Mater and Pater, Pip Pip!"

"Highly comical. I'll try and land you the lead in a *My Fair Lady* tour—to Burlington, Iowa!" I thrust back at her. She made a grimace, saying:

"O.K. I'll try and like Mrs. Cuffley-Evans, though God knows why I should."

"Good! I'll go now," I said.

"So who's stopping you?"

Now it was my turn to grinace.

"I get the impression that you don't really want me to stay the rest of the night," I said.

"My! But you catch on!" Fern retorted sarcastically, adding: "See you in the funnies."

"More likely the morgue!"

She read the note to Clare.

"Why are you going to Tétuan?" she asked me.

"My handsome face blends in better with the scenery there," I replied, adding, "and I've got an assignation there."

"With more women, I suppose."

"No, with Ginger!"

Fern looked surprised but made no comment, except to say, "I expect you'll both be pestering me then?"

"Could be." I turned to go, then stopped at the door.
"Be nice to Clare—Mrs. Cuffley-Evans."

"For your sake?" Fern said.

"No, for Captain Cuffley-Evans' sake," I said.

"Who is he?"

"Her husband."

Now Fern really was puzzled. Abdul the cat definitely smirked. I blew Fern a kiss, checked to make sure the coast was clear and stood not upon my going—but scrambled.

I had a peaceful journey back to the small hotel. There was a new receptionist on duty but he did not give me the old fish eye and so I had good reason to believe my room had not been searched. I think there would have been a certain amount of frost in his demeanour if he had seen my hold-all, empty save for newspapers stuffed in to make it appear full.

I slept nude and regretted that I had not had the sense to buy pyjamas and a new shirt, something I would rectify in the morning.

I slept soundly, being awakened by the gentle click-clack of the donkeys' hooves as they brought in their heavy matutinal loads to the Grand Succo. The breakfast coffee, croissants and butter were delicious. I went out and bought a shirt and skipped the pyjamas. I was beginning to worry about my expense account. Since I was no longer 'on the strength', I certainly was no longer on the pay roll, and it was time I watched the expenditure of every Moroccan franc, peseta or French franc till, with any luck, Ginger would have my suitcase with him when we joined up in Tétuan.

I caught a bus to Tétuan and didn't enjoy the trip at all. The bus was pack-jammed with travellers. Moors, Arabs and large Berber women, all seemed to have brought their worldly goods—bundles, old suitcases, wooden and cardboard boxes, paper bags and parcels tied with old bits of string. There were a few Spaniards and a Frenchman also travelling. It was hot, bumpy and odiferous and the trip took us three hours that seemed like a decade. I was limp on arrival at the depot in the Plaza Espana; they didn't like me a bit at the *Bendinat*, but it was an insignificant hotel off the

Square with little to commend it and they had no right to be so cagey. The receptionist positively sneered when I asked if they had rooms with private baths. As I bathed in the toilet down the corridor from my poky room, I heartily wished I could have checked in to the *Dersa*, the crack hotel in Tétuan, but I knew that that would be very foolish !

Of Ginger there was no sign and so, considerably refreshed by the bath, I wandered out into the Plaza Espana. I found Tétuan to be even more colourful than Tangier. On one side of the Plaza was a road leading through an archway covered with mosaics, into the Medina—the native quarter—and on the other the modern section of the city. The Caliph's palace, overshadowed by the buildings on either side of it, but distinguished by Moroccan soldiers, armed with tall lances, on guard outside and the crimson flag flying above; near it were two elegant mosques and in the centre of the square there was a delightful garden; all round it were cafés full of the locals imbibing the inevitable mint tea. Some of these were in European dress and, indeed, there seemed to be cafés for the Spaniards, the French and the tourists, as well as those for the Berbers, Moroccans, Mussulmen and Jews. Women, it seemed, did not sit and drink tea. I chose a café that was clearly for the Spaniards, ordered coffee and a *fine*, and idly watched the crowds. Nor was there any sign of that delightful and innocuous pastime of flirtation or appraisal as the veiled women moved past, intent on their business : It was even an insult in this part of the world to enquire of a man as to the health of his wife ! I had to confess that, personally, I found seeing only a woman's eyes could often be most provocative. I was thinking that there was something to be said for Victorianism when I was suddenly aware that coming towards me, with several Arabs in Western dress, was the phoney Mr. Tagore. I had just time to dive under the table and pretend to do up my shoelace as he and his cohorts passed. It was a narrow shave and I wondered what he was doing in Tétuan. I was to find out.

Seeing the phoney Mr. Tagore had shaken me. I had

assumed that he operated from Tangier; indeed he might still do so, but the fact that he was at present in Tétuan meant that I wasn't free to roam around looking at the sights. I hastily retired to hole-up at the *Bendinat*—a monotonous business which I tried to enliven by getting on with my new novel. However, the excitement of the last few days I had had in and around Morocco seemed to me to make my story pretty prosaic and so, finally, I skipped this, concentrating on my reading and also on some letters to Charity Stockton, Madeline at the Slade and my own daily, Lily Mertens, to tell her that I would be away a little longer than I at first anticipated.

I hadn't the right temperament for holing-up. I've always envied the gents in American gangster films who are observed on the screen, lying full length on a bed, serenely smoking a cigarette, hands behind their heads and legs crossed, seemingly prepared to be patient. By the time Ginger reached the *Bendinat*, I was like a raging lion in a far-too-small cage. I never have liked zoos, I figure the place for these animals are the national parks or preserves—women are the only animals that should be hunted.

When Ginger tapped on my bedroom door I realised how they felt at the Relief of Lucknow.

"Enter Sport," I shouted, "stay not on your coming but blinking well enter!"

When he did so I had a shock. I had forgotten that I had told him to purchase a bottle of Indian ink. Imagine my surprise when my ginger messinate entered with black hair and a dark moustache. He grinned and, in doing so, exposed his teeth—one of the front ones had been blacked-out.

"Oh my God! Good old Ginger. You would overdo it. Take it all off— you look like Archie Andrews!"

"I thought the 'tache really changed me," Ginger replied, a little hurt at my rebuke.

"You were supposed to look like me. That was the idea. But the wig's an improvement on the Indian ink last year!"* I agreed.

* As told in *Gardenias Bruise Easily*.

Ginger had brought my suitcase and I instantly flung it open and took out a clean shirt.

"I need this even more than I need you, Catesby!" I told him as I removed the cellophane paper from it.

Seeing me change shirts started Ginger off. Grabbing the old one he held it up and in a sonorous voice said:

"Have you tried DRIP? Drip is the only detergent using the new heliotrope cleansing fluid UGH!"

"Oh dry up, Ginger!" I protested, laughing at him nevertheless.

"Are you a DRIP? Be a drip with DRIP. You simply take your old shirt and drop it into Drip and what does UGH the new chemical cleansing Drip do to it?"

"Ruin it, I expect." I suggested.

"Drip removes *all* the stains, *all* the buttons and, of course, both the sleeves."

"Be careful," I added, also using the sonorous voice, "that you do not get your fingers in the Drip, the nails are liable to drop off!"

"— And on no account," Ginger added, "get Drip on any paintwork, it will blister it beyond repair! Furthermore . . ."

"Ginger! Fergawdsake!" I pleaded.

Ginger grinned. "O.K. matey, what's the buzz?"

"I'll tell you all but I expect you can use a drink?"

"A' drink? Drinks, you mean, plural. It was a hot and thirsty journey from Ceuta!"

I rang for room service. They didn't have house 'phones at the *Bendinat*.

"Were you tailed?"

"I don't think so."

"Good. And the Aston?"

"Tucked away at a garage near the airport."

"Good man! What about Horace—were you able to bring him?"

Ginger grinned. "Your Mr. Shadrack was quite a help!" he said, then he opened the button on his coat. There, in a

neat holster attached to his belt, was my revolver, 'Horace'.

"Nice work, Catesby! No trouble at the hotel at Algeciras?"

"No trouble at all. I collected your letter and gear, drove Ming to the ferry and came over on the Algeciras-Ceuta ferry. Of course I didn't put the moustache on until I got to this hotel corridor. Just pulling your leg, sport."

"You'd have looked even less like your passport photo if you had! You were lucky not to be rammed, shot at, and generally dehydrated."

"Thanks for the assignment! I thought, when you wanted the impersonation, I was doubling for you and might be pipped."

"Of course. I always give you the dirty work!"

"I suppose I can take that as a compliment?"

"Yes, indeed."

The drinks arrived and Ginger drank thirstily, while I sipped mine and brought him up to date. I explained in detail how Mr. Shadrack had, on the recommendation of Otto von Schneider, called me out of the blue to see if I'd like the trip to Tangier to operate as an independent agent in an attempt to round-up the drug-runners. I explained how Captain Cuffley-Evans had been sent to meet me and how he had been kidnapped, and how I had unwittingly met the phoney Mr. Tagore who had pumped me for information and then despatched me by car to meet a sticky end, and how I had escaped. I told Ginger of the attempt to crease me and how the real Interpol boys finally met me and told me I was a dead loss and that Otto's scheme had failed, and how they recommended that I depart right speedily.

He particularly enjoyed hearing about the bizarre way in which I met Clare Cuffley-Evans, and nodded in agreement when I said I had felt bound to try and help her.

When I told him of the grisly episode of the finger in the box, Ginger whistled.

"You certainly know some nice people!" he said.

"That poor bastard must be having one hell of a time and we've got to free him. Catesby," I said.

"If he's still breathing!"

"I think so. They want Clare to do something for them. They'll keep him alive, anyway for the time being."

"A happy thought! And Fern, what about Fern?" Ginger enquired.

"That's a weirdie!" I replied.

"But you like her!" he said.

"Of course, who wouldn't?" I agreed, and told him how I had arranged to use Fern as a messenger to Clare.

"And now?" Ginger enquired.

"And now we are awaiting a message from Clare Cuffley-Evans to say she has had instructions from the phoney Tagore."

"And when will that come through?"

"Difficult to say. They're pretty sure to work fast, though."

"Meantime you're going to show me the beauties of Tétuan?"

"I was. But an odd thing happened just now."

"Another attempt to give you the hot seat?"

"No. But the phoney Tagore's here!"

"Here?"

"In Tétuan. He darn near saw me. It was the narrowest shave. The whole idea of meeting us here was because I was dam' sure he operated from Tangier."

"How come?" Ginger enquired.

"I don't know. It could be a visit. Maybe his hide-out is here and not Tangier. Since he operates this big narcotic smuggling racket it is more than likely that he would work out of Tangier, I suppose. Anyway," I added, "for the moment we must lie doggo."

Ginger sighed. "It looks quite a place, too!" he said.

"Don't worry, my old matey. I think I can provide you ample excitement ere long."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WHEN the message came through from Clare, Ginger and I had dozed off. There was a tap on the door and, once more, I fell off the bed and Ginger off the rickety armchair. We had our revolvers out pretty smartly though and would have been a credit to the late Raymond Chandler. There was a telephone on each landing and I had to go out to it to speak to Clare. Her voice was excited and strained, but she tried to make it natural and her conversation inconsequential.

"Uncle Harry?" she enquired.

"Hallo, favourite niece!"

"That invitation. It's arrived!" Clare unperturbed.

"Oh yes?" I replied guardedly. "When is the party?"

"Tomorrow."

"Far?"

"Not very."

"Out of Tangier?"

"Yes."

"Well, now, we ought to make arrangements, don't you think?"

"Of course."

"Uncle Ginger's with me," I added.

"Uncle Ginger?"

"Yes. A very nice uncle. You'll like him. He's a friend of the little lady who came to see you. A useful uncle at—er—soirées!" I gagged, adding, "I think we ought to have a little party of our own. A little convention."

"I don't think my place is suitable," Clare replied.

Did this mean that they were, as I suspected, shadowing her? Wherever she went she would be followed; therefore if we went to Fern's the usefulness of her flat as a rendezvous would be ended. I decided, in the words of the great Winston, to Be Bold! I said to Clare.

"Let's meet up where the gal does her stuff."

"But Uncle, you don't like those sort of places," Clare said. I couldn't be sure if it was a warning or a joke.

"Not to worry," I replied, "I'll see you *inside* at ten o'clock."

"All right, Uncle."

"Don't worry. It'll be O.K.," I assured Clare. I hoped my voice sounded convincing.

I told Ginger the form. He gleefully rubbed his hands together. "Whacko!" he exclaimed.

We waited until dark and then went down to the garage and checked Ming II before getting into her—just in case. But the Aston had not been tampered with. We swung out of Tétuan and on to the fine new road the Moroccans had built to stimulate the tourist trade and zoomed back to Tangier, passing, in contrast, the inevitable groups of itinerant vendors, the nomads, the walking figures plodding steadfastly towards Tangier while the latest automobiles scorched past, doing the journey in the same number of hours they would take days. In Ming II I would do it in considerably less time. Ginger who had, of course, been in these parts before was by no means as intrigued as I was by it all—or blame my inquisitiveness as a writer, but he did say: "They've one very good custom here, the man rides the donkey while the woman walks behind."

"You think so? I find it very non-U!"

"These boyos definitely have their women under control," Ginger imparted adding: "The way to treat a woman is to let her see who is boss. Discipline and all that, in fact, have her chasing you!"

"I haven't noticed you've had any enormous successes," I said drily. To my surprise and amusement, Ginger replied "Neither have I!"

It was a wonderful night and, except for the inevitable Arab who was walking in the centre of the road and left his move to safety so late that he had to jump for it, it was an uneventful one.

Now and then we'd pass an occasional old man in a

gamboge-coloured djellabah and grey tarboush riding sedately on a thin horse, or at the side of the road, brewing their tea over a fire, a group of shepherds. We astonished them by waving, tourists usually paid no regard or stared rudely, and on the whole these people were particularly well-mannered.

Outside the city there was a brief check at the Customs, but we had taken the precaution of taping our revolvers to our legs. We drove the Aston to a convenient garage and made our way on foot to the centre of the town. On our way to the *Juany* I said to Ginger :

"Now, messinate o'mine, I've got news for you."

"Don't tell me- there ain't no Santa Claus!"

"Worse news than that," I replied. "You aren't going to sit with us at the *Juany*."

"Uh?"

"It occurred to me it would be more useful if you didn't belong to our party," I explained.

"Is this Mrs. Cuffley Thingmebob attractive?" Ginger enquired suspiciously.

"Very."

"You knave! What you mean is, you're afraid of competition! You fear that your old Fleet Air Arm buddy has too much of what it take!" Ginger retorted accusingly. "You rat, sir!"

"Think what you like, but just the same, I think while we are in Tangier's high society, if you don't know us it might be better. You may have to do a tailing job," I explained.

"O.K. I trust you but I know I shouldn't," Ginger said.

Accordingly, when we reached the *Juany*, Ginger peeled off and went in the front way and I moved round to the tatty little stage door at the side. It took a thousand franc note to get me in. I tapped on Fern's door and she uttered the one word : "Come!"

I went in. Sitting on the edge of her make-up table watching Fern make up, tapping his teeth with his fingers was Major Swinley.

I admit I was shaken. I grinned feebly.

"Hallo, Trenton, I thought we'd seen the last of you!" Major Swinley said coldly. Very coldly.

There was a long silence. Finally the Major said, "I don't know what the game is, Trenton, but it seems to me you took avoiding action from the narcotic chaps but forgot all about us."

"How the hell did you find me?" I enquired.

"Well, you left that barrow of yours at Algeciras," the Major said. He was in quite a jovial mood. He had even worked up a sixth carbon-copy smile. "That was easy. We've a man there, of course. We were foxed for a moment when the car was driven from Algeciras to Ceuta and, of course, we couldn't get a fix on you there. But *cherchez la femme!*" The Major said mysteriously. I looked searchingly at Fern who said nothing but, with the usual dead-pan, was intently dabbing her Leichner with a sad old puff. Sensing what I was thinking :

"No, not Miss Scutt," the major said smoothly.

"Eh?"

"My real name's Mamie Scutt," Fern explained. "I keep it as quiet as I can."

"I don't blame you!" I said.

"You don't think anyone would really be called Fern La Verne?" Fern asked me.

"You said it!" I replied.

"Your FBI know everything. I think your police are marvellous!" Fern said sarcastically, jerking her head in the Major's direction.

"Miss Scutt—sorry—Miss La Verne, knows very well that we know she has an American passport and she has nothing to fear from us," the Major said. Somehow this narked me. I said belligerently : "Why should she fear anything from anyone?"

"Quite so." The Major wasn't going to start any verbal fisticuffs, instead, to switch the conversation he said "*Cherchez la femme!* You are a Bardot fan, Mr. Trenton, are you not?"

"Ah! You saw me go into the cinema!"

"I didn't see you," the Major corrected me, "let us say, you were picked up again. You shouldn't have been so weak."

"I bore easily," I said coldly, glaring pointedly at him. The Major accepted that with just the faintest tautening of his jaw line.

"May I ask what you are doing back in Tangier?" he asked.

"Visiting Miss Scutt—like you," I said as impolitely as I could.

"You will leave by tomorrow's ferry," he commanded. "That's an order! You are a danger here to yourself and, what is more important, a danger to us!" He got up and straightened his jacket. "There'll be a man at the docks to make sure you go. He'll drive with you up to Madrid."

"Haven't you any females on the staff? I'm strictly male and plan to be for at least another eighty years. I'd feel more at ease with a lady."

But the Major was not amused. He was very, very angry and it was clear that he was not a man to cross. He stepped so close I could smell the pipe tobacco on his breath and he said in a clipped voice he tried to control.

"We made a mistake in asking you here, Trenton. We admit it. It didn't work. Now you're just a bloody nuisance. Get out—and stay out!"

"My! My!" I said tauntingly. "I didn't realise you cared!" It wasn't funny and I knew it and for one moment I thought that he was going to strike me. We stood looking at one another for what seemed a long time and then, without a goodbye to either of us, he had abruptly left.

"What a bad-tempered man!" I said to Fern.

But she was looking at me in the mirror penetratingly, she asked: "Who are you?"

"I told you. Just a writer," I said. "Look! I've even brought you a copy of one of my books. I found it in the town. It's a bob edition, selling at twenty-five cents here. That means that's another tuppence I've earned!" I said glibly,

plunking a paper-backed copy of my *Lilacs are for Lovers* on her make-up table.

"*'Lilacs are for Lovers'*," she read out aloud, and added, "yeah, and lilies are for Federal Dicks! What *is* your racket, Trenton? Who is this Mrs. Cuffley-Evans I took the note to?"

"Oh yes, we're dining here tonight. I'd better see if she's arrived," I said, "and I forgot to tell you Ginger's here."

Fern was giving me a very nasty look.

"I'll tell you all over dinner," I said. "After your cabaret. You will join us, won't you?" I smiled imperturbably at her. "Oh, one thing more—"

"Just to confuse me?"

"Just to confuse you. Ginger will be sitting alone at another table."

"Isn't that just ducky!" said Fern La Verne, née Mamie Scutt.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IT AFFORDED me some quiet amusement to see Ginger sitting at a table by himself some way away from mine. Fern smiled at him when she joined Clare and me, this was permissible since he could have been an habitu  . But if I found the notion of Ginger being barred from our group amusing, I was having even more fun watching Fern La Verne (ne   Mamie Scutt) and Clare Cuffley-Evans mentally prowling round one another, teeth bared, tails swishing. They were two such contrasting personalities I had hoped there would be some attraction by contrast. So much for my writer's perception : I couldn't have been more wrong ! It was quite evident that they hated each other. Clare's ice was offset by Fern's deadpan : they simply had nothing in common—except that they were very, very female.

Clare, underneath her frosty exterior, was certainly distracted, obviously the message had her on edge and I waited until we could dance to the three-piece French orchestra so that I could not be overheard when, cheek-to-cheek, I asked her what the form was.

"They rang me," she imparted to me as we spun round. "The man who rang had the nastiest voice I've ever heard. He gave me the shivers."

"The phoney Tagore !" I murmured. "I'll bet a buck !"

"Who?"

"Never mind now. Tell me more and try to smile, you look like an ice-floe !"

"Easy enough to say !" she said, thawing a little.

"Mouth the word 'cheese', it'll give you the most beautiful of smiles—like Fern's," I added ungallantly. I felt Clare ice up again.

"That awful girl. Who is she?"

"Say 'cheese' !" I ordered. Clare did so, but she remained icy and I wanted to giggle. Through clenched teeth she said :

"It's not possible to remain in this asinine position and talk!"

I simply had to burst out laughing.

"What about ventriloquists?"

This made Clare laugh, too, and she was more human again.

"That's better!" I complimented her. "We are on a dance floor and enjoying it."

"Aren't you carrying play-acting a bit too far?" Clare commented. I loved her 'play-acting'—the expression was 'perfect casting' for her. I replied: "I don't know about that, Major Swinley was backstage quizzing Fern."

Clare frowned at this. "Oh!" she said.

"So you see. . . ."

"What did he say when he saw you?" she cut in.

"He suggested in *very* basic English, that I should be—er—on my way!"

"What a pity you came into Tangier tonight."

"Not really. His merry men had spotted me earlier on. Not to worry," I said nonchalantly, "I don't think he knows I know you and he certainly doesn't suspect that I'm going to play a lone hand—always excepting Ginger, that is."

"Is Ginger the man sitting with the voluptuous blonde?" Clare asked. I was about to deny this when I swung her round so that I could see Ginger and, sure enough, there he was giving some flashy, stinky piece the business.

"Trust Ginger!" I shook my head in pseudo sorrow. "And now *revenons à nos moutons*!" I requested.

"I'm to go to Chauen," Clare whispered in my ear.

"Chauen—where's that?"

"A short way outside Tétuan. It's a small town in the foothills."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

"Are they sending a car?"

"No. I'm to go in ours."

"My Aston?" I looked surprised. Clare pulled her face away from mine to say:

"Ours," she repeated, "my husband's and mine."

"Of course. How silly of me! Somehow, never having met the Captain, I. . . ."

Clare gave me a look that could be classified as more than faintly contemptuous.

"I said I was sorry," I said. "Go on about the meeting place."

"I'm to go to the *Parador*. It's a very attractive hotel for the tourist trade. It's got a swimming pool, of all things, and is particularly well liked by the French."

"You're not meeting there?"

"No. I'm to be there for lunch. After lunch I'm to walk in the small *medina*, the native market; there'll be a seller of melons, I'm to price them, then move over and order coffee in the garden of the Orchid Café."

"Cor! Pure Leslie Charteris!" I whispered.

"What do you think they want, Garway?" Clare whispered. I held her tighter.

"I've no idea. But don't worry."

"I must worry."

"Yes, of course, I understand. That was fatuous of me," I whispered. I held her even tighter.

She was 'wearing' Lanvin's *Arpège*, and it suited her personality, it was quiet and penetrating and expensive. And I felt she was all of these things and I would have liked to have told her so, except that it would have been corny to do so and she would dislike me for it. I spun her round as the three-piece French band became groovy and, as I did so, the locket attached to the band on her wrist tapped me smartly on the nose. This eased her tension.

"Does it contain hair or a photo?" I asked suddenly. Clare pretended not to understand.

"The locket."

"Oh *that*. Aren't you inquisitive?" she countered.

"Yes. You forget I'm a writer and a sort of a Shamus," I said.

"Shamus sounds slightly spurious," she said.

"Hm! Quite an alliteration. You ought to be writing your-

self!" I said, adding: "When this is all over, maybe you'll put it on paper!"

"If it has a happy ending," Clare retorted. "My husband's already been mutilated and God knows what else!" she said, growing serious again.

"Please try not to worry," I placated. "Who knows, he may be free by this time tomorrow," I suggested.

"I hope so," she repeated, "but what do they want of me?"

I smiled inanely and shrugged off the question, but I thought, 'What, indeed'?

The dance tune came to an end, the percussionist gave a roll on his skins to announce an intermission and we left the floor. Ginger took his eyes off his over-bright blonde and grinned at me as Clare and I walked back to our table to join Fern, who had looked stiletto as we had danced. I ordered champagne to try and inject a spot of gaiety into the proceedings.

"Eat! Drink! Be merry for—" I quickly stopped myself, but too late, Clare instantly completed it for me.

"—tomorrow we die?" she said. My laugh was as phoney as Chop Suey was Chinese.

"Of course not, Clare. Don't be so morbid!" I tried to cheer her up. "Your old Shamus here has it pretty well buttoned up," I added. Fern looked at me.

"That makes a change," she cracked, directing her remarks to Clare, "most of the time he's interested in the un-buttoning!"

"Thanks!" I retorted, "for putting in the good word for me."

Fern merely smiled at her own joke, then said: "Tell the band I want to dance."

"They'll start up in a second."

"Not in a second, now! I want to dance *now*," Fern said. I wondered if she had been drinking backstage before her act. She certainly had an odd look about the eyes.

I said: "In a minute, Fern, they've just time out for a breather."

"If you won't tell 'em, I will!" Fern said antagonistically. She got up to do so and Clare looked down her aristocratic nose. Quickly I got up.

"What do you want them to play?" I asked her.

"A *cha-cha*—that's if you can do it," she taunted.

"If I can do it? You're talking to the man who put *cha-cha* on the map in Lima."

"And where in hell is that?" Fern enquired.

"It's in Limey-Land," I told her, turning to Clare for confirmation. "Isn't it, Clare? It's about half the size of Burlington."

"The Arcade?" Clare asked.

"No. The burg in Iowa. Fern knows all about it, she was born and brought up there."

"*Dragged up!*" she corrected me, adding, "smaller than Burlington? That's not possible! Go tell the man I wanna *cha-cha*."

This I did. The boys were a little sour but I sweetened them with a swift soupçon of grissie. It was surprising how swiftly three disagreeable chappies became affable.

The *cha-cha* started. I went back to collect Fern, asking Clare to excuse us; she nodded with as much warmth as a polar bear's behind. When Fern and I turned to the tiny dance floor, Ginger was already there doing his stuff with the Stalky Piece.

"We've got competition!" I remarked to Fern.

"That Ginger! How did you two ever meet up?" she enquired.

"Messmates. Practically won the war for dear Old Britain. 'There we were upside down over at deck level over the Bismarck' . . . you know, dicing with death, and all that."

"Sometimes," said Fern as we began to dance. "I just can't figure a thing you say!"

"*De Nada!* Nowt! Skip it. English sense of humour. Practically non-existent. Ask any American!"

The whole point of a *cha-cha* is, of course, that you never touch your partner. You advance and retire practically

shoulder to shoulder but never clinch. I had a feeling that Fern ordered a *cha-cha* just because of the very provocative nature of the dance.

"You are a witch!" I told her as we danced. She returned my look as if a halo couldn't melt in her mouth.

Just as we were beginning to dance in unison I received a colossal bang in the back. I turned belligerently.

"Why the hell—?" I began with aggression. I might have known it would be Ginger.

"I *am* so sorry, sir!" he apologised profusely. "No damage, I trust? Everything in apple-pie order?"

I glared, but Fern gave him one of her rare smiles. We continued to dance.

"You promised to tell me all. So far you've told me nothing."

"All in good time, my little chickadee."

"I trust that Ginger is seeing Mrs. Cuffley-Evans home—and soon!" Fern said.

"You don't exactly dote on her, do you?"

"I trust that Ginger is seeing Mrs. Cuffley-Evans home," Fern repeated.

"Did you have radishes for supper?" I enquired. "You keep repeating."

"Ha! Ha! English joke!" said Fern. "Get rid of the lady, Gar', I want to go for a drive."

I looked at her in perplexity. Her eyes were deep pools, that moment quite unfathomable.

"With whom?"

"You, you nit!" she replied, adding: "Or had you figured on Ginger taking me home and you planned to squire Lady Ice-Water?" she hazarded.

The *cha-cha* ended.

Ginger and the S.P. applauded vociferously.

"I think I'll ask them to play *Love Your Magic Spell is Everywhere!*" I quipped.

"Go see a taxidermist!" Fern retorted.

"Now that's very un-ladylike and I'm quite sure you don't know what it means," I replied.

"Oh yes I do! Ginger taught me on his last trip." Fern imparted.

We rejoined Clare at the table. The waiter need not have iced the champagne, Clare's demeanour would have done that, there was frost practically everywhere. I hurriedly signalled for the champagne to be poured. I hoped it would cheer the ladies a little. I noticed Ginger mock-clucking from the dance floor.

"I want to go now, please," Clare said quietly.

Fern visibly brightened. It wasn't much of a success, my party. I frowned. I felt rather like the babe between two Mums Solomon planned to slice in half.

I whispered: "Look, Fern! You can join Ginger."

"He'll like that," she said, jerking her head in the direction of the dance floor. "He's practically got a stranglehold on the hot tamale he's with now."

"I must talk to Clare—tell her the—er—arrangements for tomorrow."

"Why not here, now?"

I indicated a couple of nasty-looking geezers with permanent five o'clock shadow sitting at the next table. They could have been *bona fide* customers, on the other hand, they might not. I made a slight inclination of my head at Ginger as he spun the Stalky Piece round, indicating that he should return to his table.

Reluctantly Fern got up, taking her glass of champagne. I called the waiter and asked him to remove the champagne to Ginger's table. I told Clare I'd get a taxi and to meet me in front of the *Juany* in a minute. I told the Manager I would be back. Meanwhile Fern had crossed to Ginger and joined him and the S.P. Not even the champagne placated the Stalky Piece for Fern's intrusion.

I went out by the stage door, hired a taxi which took longer than I anticipated and drove round to the front of the *Juany*. Clare was in the lobby, her foot was working overtime. I opened the taxi door, still remaining within, and whistled softly to her. She came hurrying out. She was in a cold fury.

I gave the driver Clare's address and said:

"Don't be so tazy!"

"Was it absolutely necessary to have that girl with us?"

"That girl," I said, dropping my voice in case Jehu in front was all-ears, "is a useful liaison."

Clare sniffed.

"I mean," I corrected myself, "that—."

I got no further, Clare cut in with, "I *quite* understand."

"Clare be reasonable!" I pleaded.

Clare had no intention of being reasonable.

"What is the plan for tomorrow?"

I told her.

When I returned to the *Juany* stage door, the Moroccan doorkeeper, puzzled by my comings and goings, but albeit pleased at the toots he kept receiving, enquired: "You police?"

I nodded. "Private Eye!" I explained. He nodded sagaciously, but it hadn't furthered his information any. The French jazz trio eyed me and exchanged looks. I expect they, too, wondered what the hell was going on.

Ginger, enjoying every moment of it, the envy of all eyes, sat between the Stalky Piece and Fern. The champagne had been drunk. They were having quite a ball, laughing at one of Ginger's funny quips. They weren't tight but they were mellow. Even Fern seemed happy. I crossed to their table: "You'd better pretend to introduce me," I said to Ginger.

"Oh yeah." He did so. As I sat down, Fern pointedly looked at her watch as if she had timed my departure and time away. Answering her unasked question, I said: "Not to worry, I merely saw the lady to her door!"

Fern pretended she didn't hear.

"Shall we crash the old swede?" I asked.

The girls looked a trifle guarded at this.

"Hit the hay," Ginger translated, "pardon my old messmate, a nautical term."

"It sounded nautical, too!" The Stalky Piece said with a shrill laugh. She had a French accent. Also a French bra, but what it uplifted was clearly her own. It seemed to me

that Ginger answered with alacrity. He was moving off before I had time to pay the bill, which wasn't exactly on the parsimonious side.

"This isn't a clip joint," I said, "they merely guillotine you!"

"Don't worry, sport, we'll go fifty-fifty. It's worth it," Ginger said. "It's been quite an evening."

"Up till now it hasn't," said Fern.

"Temper! Temper!" I retorted, turning to Ginger to enquire, "and pray, sir, what does your enchanting guest do for a living—or do I presume too much?"

"The joke is," said Ginger, "she works in a frigidaire shop." He rocked with laughter. The S.P. smiled, too.

"She needs to!" I gagged.

"I cracked that when you were seeing Ma Cuffley-Evans home," Ginger imparted.

"Yes. I was afraid of that," I said. I looked at my watch. "For our return to you-know-where, Ginger, we'd better rendezvous. Let's see, at the front of the *Riff* Hotel—in—what time?" I looked at Ginger questioningly. His red eyebrows shot skywards. I decided to give him an hour. If the *Riff* was closed, or wouldn't admit me, I expect I could find another café or night club that was open: it was only fair to give Ginger a break. "I'll have Ming with me," I told him, meaning that I would have collected the Aston.

"O.K." he said, but now Fern looked as unhappy as a dog with a muzzle.

"I'll tell you about Ming once we have retired."

She merely glared.

"Good night, Sweet Prince!" I said to Ginger, adding, as I bowed to the S.P., "and of course, Princess. You take the front way and I'll take the back and I'll be in Scotland afore 'ee!" I added, "I expect it'll be a dam' sight more comfortable than where we'll be in the morning!"

"You're not kidding!" said Ginger. He looked a trifle sheepish at bidding Fern goodnight, having this Jumbo-size sex-pot with him. But then Fern understood men. She and I went off by the same old escape hatch, the stage door.

"So long, Buster!" I said to the custodian.

"Me Abdul!" He corrected me.

I nodded. "Sorry. I thought you were a Ginger cat!" I said. "Be careful of squeaky floor boards, won't you?"

Abdul naturally looked perplexed and, at last, Fern smiled.

"That's it. Try hard," I entreated

"Are you in love with this Mrs. Cuffley-Evans?" she said suddenly, unexpectedly.

"You really *are* a character!" I replied evasively. "You must send those sort of questions to my solicitor." I didn't want to answer for several reasons, the chief one being it was a question I had been asking myself and avoiding answering.

We had difficulty finding a taxi, but when we finally found one and I gave the driver Fern's address she said: "I want to see what Ming looks like"

"O.K." I said. I gave the driver the address where I had parked the Aston.

"But I must warn you," I said to Fern, "she's absolutely enchanting."

"This is another you're in love with? You're the fastest guy I've ever known. You've only been in North Africa a few days and you already know half the female population."

"And Ginger knows the other. Shall I tell you something?" I quipped, "we've found out that all those ladies in yashmaks aren't women at all. Just think how much time we've lost ogling men!"

But Fern was thinking of Ming and I grinned to myself as I thought of her reaction to the D.B. when she realised Ming wasn't a Chinese courtesan. We drove to the garage and I paid the taxi off.

"This is a garage!" Fern said.

"My! My! Grannie what big eyes you've got!" I said. "Did you think Ming lived over a Chinese laundry?"

Fern was clearly puzzled. We walked into the garage.

"Allow me to introduce you to Ming," I said, with a flourish, indicating the Aston. "As you see, she is very beautiful."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

FERN, realising the joke was on her, recovered quickly. "A fast piece, too, I imagine," she said.

"Too right and my oath as the saying is. Now," I told her, "this one I really am in love with!" I patted Ming affectionately. Fern made a moue and shrugged. She was about to get into the car when I stopped her. "A tiny minute," I said, "while I just make sure the practical jokers haven't been busy."

With care I checked to see that nothing was wrong. The nightwatchman, tousled and sleepy, came out from his cubby-hole, scratching his backside. I paid him and went round to open the door for Fern.

"I can tell you're European," Fern said, "I don't recall anyone ever opening a door for a woman at home."

"Eton and Balliol," I explained with a wink, "followed by a post-grad course at the 400."

I gently revved until Ming was warm enough to move out. I swung out and turned towards the Boulevard Pasteur but Fern stopped me. It was a wonderful evening, the fascinating town was silvered by a full moon and the sky was peppered sweetly with stars.

"Let's drive!" Fern suggested.

"Well . . ." I hesitated.

"You gave Ginger an hour," she reminded me.

"I was thinking that you just might end up looking like a colander," I said.

"Eh?"

"Clare's enemies are my enemies," I explained. "Though they want Clare alive, they are not so particular about me!"

"Let's drive along by the sea!" Fern suggested. She was actually enthusiastic. I decided to humour her.

"O.K.," I agreed. "But you'll put a codicil saying you coerced me," I added.

"What with your English accent and your high-falutin' sayings I don't get half what you say," Fern told me. But it was a warmer, less remote Fern who sat beside me as we sped along towards the ocean.

I glanced in the mirror and grinned to myself. A car had suddenly shot out of a side turning, probably instructed by radio to pick me up and tail me. I dropped speed a little to see if I could identify the driver. There were two men in it, but in the dark I couldn't decide if they were my old chums from the proposed Larache trip. The car was a Thunderbird. It had local number plates and it had a nice turn of speed. I decided to play funny games.

I said to Fern: "Hold on to your hat!"

I dropped Ming into second and took it up to 6,000 and as I wound up in third I started to pull away, I felt quite a meanie. I said to Fern:

"Too many people in Tangier—there's as much privacy as a roller towel—or a telephone party-line."

"Why the hurry?" she enquired.

"The gents with the Sten." I retorted.

"What gents and what's a Sten?" she asked. It didn't seem the time or the place to throw a scare into her. I let it ride.

When we had reached a few twists and turns I suddenly shot round a side road, causing Fern to lurch against me.

"Fergawdsakes . . . !" she began.

The Thunderbird zoomed past.

"Sorry, honey. Excuse my armour!" I took out the Mauser, slammed the Aston into reverse, regained the main road and chased after my pursuer. Now I was after *him*.

"Bandits?"

"Bandits indeed!" I agreed. Funny that she should have picked on the old flying term for the enemy.

The two boyos ahead were too busy searching for me in front for them to realise that now they were being tailed. I got nicely near and remembered with a twinge of nostalgia the old routine—deflection of flight, aim-off, centre of the sights and . . . I flooded him with my headlights and raised my revolver. "Duck!" I shouted to Fern. She did so. The

man beside the driver turned quickly in astonished alarm. It was my old friendly-enemy the gallant Major Swinley. I dropped my revolver and accelerated and quickly overtook him then, roaring with laughter, waved him goodbye. "You can come up now," I said to Fern.

"When you've quite finished playing cops and robbers . . ."
Fern began, sitting back in the bucket-type seat.

"Not to worry. They'll be too ashamed to follow."

"And who was 'they'?"

"Major Swinley."

"Major Swinley?"

"And a chum." I chuckled.

"They aim to show you off the premises," Fern said.

"Yes. Tangier's most popular personality."

"And eligible bachelor," Fern said. She seemed even more dead-pan than usual when she said it. Somehow I couldn't be sure that she was serious.

By now we had reached the long, wide, palm-lined Boulevard d'Espagne and sped towards Spartel. There's a rocky bend there and it was a beach frequently used by the Tangerines when the Levantine wind was making the Tangier beach too blowy for comfort.

As I predicted, too shame-faced now to tail me, Major Swinley and his mate in the Thunderbird had stopped following me. When we left the built-up area of the big hotels and the beach cafés, and arrived at Spartel and had climbed a little so that we were looking down on the sea, Fern said :
"Let's stop a little, shall we?"

I obligingly pulled up. We looked back at the town. It was a magical, hot Moroccan evening with a balmy sea breeze to cool the sultry atmosphere.

"It's corny and it's been written umpteen times," I said, "but the sea *does* look like beaten silver."

Fern added, 'out of the blue', "I'm glad Ming's Ming." She snuggled close to me.

"Why, Fern, this is a surprise !" I gagged. "Don't tell me you care."

"Do you always make silly jokes?" she asked.

"Pretty nearly always," I replied.

"Could you make an exception now and tell me something beautiful," she said.

I looked at her profile as she studied the stars.

"You're a funny girl," I said, slipping back in my seat.

"Why funny? What's funny about wanting something beautiful?"

"Not that. I suppose deep down you're really the romantic sort, Fern."

"And why not?"

"No reason why not, sweetie, no reason at all."

"Go on," Fern insisted. "Recite something lovely. Some poetry or something."

"Poetry? Are you crazy?"

"Yes. Say something real nice."

"Well, I think you're a honey, I really do."

"Not that. Something wonderful, like, like," she paused for a moment perhaps afraid I'd laugh, then recited: "We have heard the Trumpets of Reality that drown the vain din of the Thing that Seems'," Fern said. I sat up. This was a hell of a girl.

"Where did you ever hear that?"

"On the radio. It was a play or something. I liked it and I wrote and sent the radio station a stamped envelope and they sent the speech back, typed. It goes on 'We have walked with the Friend of Friends in the garden of the Stars, and He is pitiable to poor lovers who are pierced by the arrows of this ghastly world'. Don't you love it?"

"It's O.K.," I said. I looked at Fern's profile. Here, indeed, was a weirdie.

"Look at the stars, Trenton. Aren't they magical?" she said.

"Yes."

She sighed.

"Go on, more. More poetry. Something about the stars."

"No can do."

"Try, Trenton," she requested.

I screwed up my face in concentration.

"Here's something, not about stars but much like this place," I said and began to quote :

"Here, where the world is quiet;
Here, where all trouble seems
Dead winds' and spent waves' riot—'
Er—something something 'dream of dreams'."

"Oh you can do better than that!" Fern said.

"Swinburne," I retorted defensively. "I got a prize for remembering it all, once."

"Try again, Garway. Something very lovely. The most lovely thing you can remember."

She had called me by my Christian name and I liked the way she said it in full, most people said Gar—which I hated.

She took my hand, and she was trembling, and I felt the excitement tingling through her and into me, too, like an electric current.

"At school, as a kid—a love poem or something," Fern pleaded.

"Silly child," I said. Then, quite suddenly I began, "'Behold thou art fair my love; behold thou art fair. Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet—'."

"Yes. Oh yes! What is it?"

"Song of Solomon, from the Bible. I just remembered, I liked it."

"More, darling," Fern whispered.

"'Darling'?" I repeated.

"Go on!" she commanded.

"You are a surprise," I said. "Well, if I can remember." I fumbled for the words. "'Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies. . . .'"

"Yes. It's beautiful."

Suddenly she took my hand impulsively saying: "Let's lie on the beach—"

We got out of the car and we lay very close together.

"There, isn't that better?"

"Yes. Yes indeed!"

The sea was making a splendidly soothing sussurous sound. There was a heady smell from the pine trees and the moon

on Fern's face made her—to me—for the first time quite beautiful.

She lay with her eyes closed and her lips parted and I whispered into her ear.

"'My beloved is unto me as a cluster of henna-flowers in the vineyards of Engedi'."

"Hold me, darling, hold me as you tell me," she whispered and a little shiver of ecstasy overcame her. "Love me, Garway," she pleaded.

"Now, sweet!" I cautioned, murmuring: "This was going to be a drive. A drive only, remember?"

"Love me, darling," she pleaded. "But be gentle with me. Never before . . . never before . . ."

She opened her eyes and looked at me and I knew that she spoke the truth. Fern the pseudo-sophisticate, Fern the tough Honky Tonk Gal. And I knew too, she would have no regrets.

"'My beloved is unto me as a cluster of henna-flowers'," she repeated. "Am I doing it right? Teach me, darling."

"Sweet!" I murmured.

"Oh my love, my love."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

FERN AND I were happily silent on the way back to her flat. Words did not seem necessary. We were in tune. We drove in silence. It was a warm, understandable silence and I wished that we could go on driving and driving in this mutual delight in one another's company. I was still dazed at the unexpectedness of the experience I had received; of the warm, warmth, impulsiveness and utterly surprising naivety of a person I had instantly liked despite the tough barriers, the glacial façade, the cryptic, cynicism.

We kissed goodnight at her flat and I promised I'd call or contact her the moment the mission for Clare was over.

I swung the Aston round and went down the hill to the seafront and the *Riff* Hotel. Ginger was nowhere to be seen and a tired-eyed night clerk knew nothing of a red-headed Englishman. I lit a cigarette and stood in the doorway of the *Riff*, keeping a wary eye open for any chaps who didn't particularly care for me.

Suddenly there was the sound of some kind of bell ringing. I peered out and there, riding at great speed, came Ginger, on a woman's bicycle. He was much out of breath and obviously had worried that I might leave without him.

"Careful, amigo!" I cautioned. "Take it easy!"

"Not the boy I was!" Ginger admitted between great pantings, "Too much vino, women, and cantatas!"

"You're as out of breath as Dick Turpin's horse after the ride to York!"

"Too true. I forgot the time. Now that Popsie . . ." He began an exuberant rave about the vital statistics of the Stalky Piece, about which I had to conclude he had made certain verifications. As he babbled I revved Ming and we moved off for Tétuan. We were not tailed and on the excellent road out of Tangier we made excellent time on that excellent night. I did not want to talk about Fern and so I

was glad that Ginger had this bout of loquaciousness. He kept it up until we had nearly reached Tétuan where we made a right turn off to Chauen. As we started the slow climb up the foothills, I said :

"Catesby, will you now try to stem this verbal diarrhoea which has overtaken you and listen to my final plans?"

"Sure, Skip'," Ginger said, deliberately irritating me. I hated being called Skipper; it sounded as if I'd been M.N. not F.A.A. Not that he meant this disparagingly, the M.N. boys had been *quelque chose*, it was by saying Skip' Ginger gave me that extra half-ring I hadn't earned : I had been a two-and-a-half—no scrambled eggs for me.

"I'm not exactly happy about the word 'final', though," he added.

"Sir, in the words of Doc Johnson, 'I look upon myself as a very patient man' but I fail to perceive your drift." I replied.

"'Final instructions'," Ginger repeated the words. "It sounds sort of *funereal* to me!"

"Rest assured if they nab us the way they want to nab us, there won't be enough of us for the funeral!" I predicted.

"Thanks for those comforting words, Skip'," Ginger retorted. I merely winced.

Xauen—to give Chauen its Moroccan name—was a delightful little town in the hills—about forty-five minutes from Tétuan and an hour and a half from Tangier. The residential section was pleasantly laid out with modern and attractive square-shaped villas surrounded by lush greenery, orange and lemon trees, pepper and palm. The medina, or native quarter, was nearby and the market square had its inevitable mosque where the faithful prayed five times a day, facing Mecca. Behind the town, rising steeply, were the mountains—where men could hide out indefinitely. Maybe Clare's husband was captive in some cave up there. The day was hot and sunny and at the attractive and modern *Parador* hotel, Senor Linares, the proprietor, beamed at the sun-kissed guests as they plunged into his swimming pool which, fan-

tastically in this remote spot, he had built into his hotel patio. Here, French was the predominant language. It was an ideal holiday resort.

Right on schedule, Clare, alone and driving her Austin, pulled up outside the *Parador*. Nearby squatted, or stood talking, always talking garrulously as was their custom, by the entrance to the Medina, many groups of burnous-clothed Arabs, Moroccans, Berbers, Jews, men from the hills. The scene was peaceful enough until an American tourist, newly moved into the *Parador*, tried to take the picture of a shrouded man making his mint tea. He screamed epithets at the innocent if inquisitive visitor, until a more experienced European explained that, to the native, the camera could be the Evil Eye, and it was advisable to request permission before you pointed it at anyone in those parts.

This sudden, unexpected eruption in the otherwise tranquil scene gave point to the probability, exciting, bizarre, that among that heterogeneous, shrouded group of humanity, were dangerous villains, men who would stop at nothing to further their evil purpose.

According to instructions, Clare ordered her lunch; sipped a cocktail at the side of the swimming pool, smiling agreeably at the laughing, splashing children cavorting in the pool, standing with cocktail in unshaking hand, with grace and nonchalance, so Ginger imparted, later. Ginger, a new guest who had arrived at the *Parador* very late the previous night—early dawn to be exact—but who now, as he swam lazily in the pool, was a guest at the hotel, was keeping an avuncular eye on her. He was late in to lunch, but he skipped the post-prandial coffee and sauntered out to look at the Medina a few seconds after Clare had walked out into the torrid noon-day sun.

According to instructions, she priced the melons, moving slowly along past groups of marketeers bartering, bargaining, arguing, expostulating. To make sure that the plan did not go awry, Ginger followed her no further. He stopped at one stall to examine intently the delicate bead-work on a leather slipper. But the waiter at the Orchid Café had Clare

in sight. He watched her approach and he made her very welcome when she decided to sit on the terrace at his café and enjoy a further coffee. She gave the waiter her order in French and the waiter acknowledged it in French—execrable French, lower-fourth French with an Eton accent! Yes, it had cost me most of the remainder of my Moroccan currency, but I, indeed, had taken the waiter's place. Ginger said afterwards I looked so seedy I was 'perfect casting'. I returned with Clare's coffee, the cup and spoon rattling against the saucer like the playing of castanets, I was that nervous. I envied Clare her *savoir-faire*.

"Do I have to drink it so soon after the hotel coffee?" she murmured.

"Well, at least, pretend," I murmured back, as I pretended to mop the table. I then bowed and moved well away from the table and waited.

It wasn't a long wait. Very soon a tall, lean, greying European appeared in an elegant fawn-coloured tropical suit. He had a long, suave face with a beaky nose and he was very handsome, but his eyes were quite sinister, quite frightening. Piercing, penetrating, they were the eyes of a hawk. Bright, beady, cruel eyes. It was a handsome, dissipated face, arrogant and cynical, and I could picture the women positively anxious for him to be contemptuous of them.

He, too, in French, ordered a coffee and I had to make a mental note that, should he talk in English, I would feign that I did not comprehend. I went for the coffee.

The proprietor was in the kitchen now having regrets at letting me pull this trick. "Just a joke," I had explained. Some joke! I smiled to reassure him, but I wondered if he would get it rough from these sweethearts for co-operating with me over the deception, though, if things worked out the way I hoped, it was merely a trick to try and fix up a 'parler'. I was wearing an apron over my black trousers and white shirt—the traditional French waiter's summer clothes—and I took the revolver out of my pocket, eased the safety catch forward and stuck the revolver back into my trouser belt. I thought

the café proprietor would have a seizure when he saw this. Though my stomach was feeling like my first storm at sea, I merely winked at him as if this was the most natural thing in the world, and went out with the second coffee, pausing a moment to try and steady the rattling cup. Somehow my nonchalance was spoiled by the noise of that cup.

As I brought the coffee he had just said, pseudo-surprised : "It's Mrs. Cuffley-Evans, isn't it?" In a voice with an attractive accent which could have been Spanish or French, but it was not a German accent. Clare acknowledged his greeting with a ghost of a smile, nodding slightly.

"May I join you?" The tall stranger enquired and, not waiting for her reply, he did so, saying laughingly : "Garçon ! Bring my coffee to Madame's table."

I waited till he was seated and, taking the coffee, I heard him say :

"We've a—er—mutual acquaintance anxious to see you, Mrs. Evans." I noticed Clare tauten. I stood waiting for the newcomer's next remark but, sensing that I was standing behind him, I said curtly, drawing back a step and taking hold of the gun : "Listen, Comrade, I'm holding a neat and deadly Mauser under this apron. The first peep out of you and I'll blow you to hell. You want Mrs. Evans and we want Captain Evans. This is a stalemate, if you understand the expression. So I'm here to make a deal with you."

The stranger's jaw muscles tightened. He had tremendous difficulty in controlling his fury. I felt sure he would snap under the strain and make a grab for my gun, but I had made it clear from my tone and expression I wasn't going to be fooled or rattled and that, instantly, I'd pull the trigger if he started anything.

There followed what seemed an eternity of what must have been a few seconds' poignant silence during which the stranger pulled himself together. I simply couldn't resist saying : "That's better. Taking too many of the things you peddle, aren't you?"

At this his face contorted with rage and, again for another brief moment, I felt he'd make a wild grab for me or the gun.

But this time I took a step forward menacingly, as if to challenge him. It seemed important to me to prove I was equally as tough as he. He looked at me with his insolent evil eyes and weighed up the situation and decided against himself.

"What—what do you want?" he enquired. In his rage, he could hardly get the words out.

"It's very simple," I replied. "If anything goes wrong here you'll kill Captain Evans, but you want to barter, don't you? You want Mrs. Evans to do something for you. *I want to take her place,*" I said. He looked very surprised at this, considered it, then enquired :

"What's the trick?"

"No trick, but if I can do whatever it is—and maybe I could do it better than Mrs. Evans, then take me in her place. You've still got the Captain, what have you got to lose? Your boss—the phoney Mr. Tagore—knows me."

For the first time the tall stranger smiled. I had forgotten that my reference to the phoney Mr. Tagore would amuse him.

"The 'phoney Mr. Tagore', as you so call him, has mentioned your name to me—you are the novelist Garway Trenton, aren't you?"

I nodded.

"So silly of Mr. Shadrack in London to think we wouldn't suspect you instantly. Most convenient that Captain Evans—excuse me," he turned to Clare, sitting silent, white-faced and still, and with biting sarcasm said : "Cuffley hyphen Evans ! I do apologise. I know how important it is to the British upper classes these, how do you say it double-handled names are." He turned back to me. Suddenly changing his tone and saying : "You know that my men have you covered and at a sign from me they will fire and kill you both?"

I nodded. "Yes—Mr.—Mister?"

"My name—to you, at any rate—is Garon. Paul Garon."

"French? Belgian?"

"Never mind that now. You did understand what I said?"

"Perfectly. But you are omitting one thing," I retorted.

"And that is?"

"That I would instantly kill you—so, as I said earlier, it's a check-mate. *Egalité*, if you understand that better," I said quietly.

"I understand perfectly, thanks to an—" he searched for the word, "exemplary education at the Latymer Grammar School, Hammersmith. You know Hammersmith?"

I nodded. "But I'll remind you of your words! Never mind that now. *Revenons à nos moutons*," I added, more than anything to see if he *were* French.

All he did was to say imperturbably: "What a ghastly accent. Obviously a Harrow man!"

I let the insult pass. I said: "The phoney Mr. Tagore talked to you about me," I reminded him.

"The 'phoney Mr. Tagore' said that you were on your way back to Madrid with your tail between your legs. I am bound to confess that I was very surprised to find you masquerading as a comic waiter."

"Never mind about all that!" Clare butted in. "What about my husband? What are you doing to him? Is he safe? Will you let Mr. Trenton take my place?" she pleaded.

Paul Garon considered this for a moment, finally replying, "My! My! What a lot of questions! Firstly your husband is well, breathing, yes breathing quite nicely, 'evenly', you understand?"

Clare looked aghast.

"What do you mean?" she enquired in a frightened voice.

"Nothing. Nothing to worry about, at all. He's in—er—good hands."

There was a sadistic delight in the way Garon said this. It could mean anything. It was horribly sinister and both Clare and I, knowing of the ghastly tricks they can get up to in that part of the world, were badly shaken, but we both tried not to show it.

"As to whether—is that the correct expression, my English is a little rusty, you will excuse me?—as to whether the novelist, Trenton, can substitute for you Mrs. Evans, I have an idea that he might agree. In fact, I think the idea might well appeal to him. Incidentally, call him Mr. Dragarno,

he'd prefer that. The word 'phoney' might annoy him." Garon looked at me cynically adding : "Mr. Dragarno gets quite bad tempered when he's annoyed."

"I can imagine," I retorted, succinctly, adding, "and how many aliases has this Mr. Dragarno? He looked Tahitian to me!" I hazarded.

"Not a bad guess. Call it a near-miss, shall we?"

"I know what I'll call you in a minute if you don't—"

"Don't put Mrs. Evans —sorry, Mrs. *Cuffley*-Evans, out of her misery! Is that what you were about to say?" Garon asked. I did not answer. Garon suddenly moved a hand towards his hip pocket. I whipped out my revolver and jabbed it in his belly.

"Don't!" I ordered.

He smiled, but it hadn't any warmth in it. He said :

"My apologies. I forgot how edgy you are! Mind if I smoke? I was only reaching for a cigarette."

"Maybe. But it can wait. I'm what they call trigger happy. And don't think I can't use it."

"Perish the thought!" Garon replied suavely. "Of course we've checked on you. D.F.C., I think."

"D.S.C.," I corrected him, "but I didn't mean that."

"Of course not. Gave them away 'with a pound of tea' I think was the modest way you fellows talked about it. But I know this wasn't so. Let me see, D.S.C., oh, then you were Navy not R.A.F."

"Mr. Garon, *please!*" said Clare again, pleadingly.

"Am I teasing you! Do forgive me. I get a childish pleasure out of watching people wriggle. As a boy, cutting worms in half often intrigued me!" Garon confessed.

"You're really a nasty bit of gorgonzola," I said. Here was one expression that had him puzzled.

"It's a cheese," I imparted.

"I am aware of that."

"It smells!" I told him. The colour drained from his face.

He got to his feet. I simply couldn't resist it. I shoved him down again.

"I'll tell you when to get up!" I commanded.

"Why, you—!" His English failed him. He groped for words.

I said : "Now come on ! *Is this a deal?*"

Once again he controlled himself.

"Yes. Yes. It's a deal. You come in place of Mrs. Evans. And I'll like that. I'll like that very much indeed."

CHAPTER TWENTY

"If you don't mind, Mr. Garon," I said icily to my captor, "I'll give this to Mrs. Cuffey-Evans." I handed Clare the Mauser. Garon shrugged his shoulders.

"As you wish. But Mrs. Evans will have a safe conduct back to Tangier," he assured me. Clare got up. She looked at me, not quite knowing how to begin to say the things she wanted to. I put her out of her predicament by saying for her :

"It's O.K., Clare. I'll give Peter—isn't it?—Peter your love and I'll try and do what these wicker baskets want."

I noticed Garon stiffen resentfully at this.

"God bless you!" she said. It didn't sound trite. Just matter-of-fact and said with such sincerity it made me feel pretty powerful, and I found myself recalling 'Stonewall' Jackson's famous statement : "One man with courage makes a majority."

I felt at least ten feet tall.

Garon and I stood watching Clare walk slowly, head erect, back to the *Parador*. We could just see her as she got into her car, started it up and swung it round towards the road down from the hills. She raised her hand in farewell, the one with the bracelet on which was the locket. I replied with a similar farewell, thinking 'I never did see the inside of that locket.' I stood watching the departing car and forgot for a moment Garon and all that he stood for, evil, brute force, the vice and power of the black market, the wickedness of peddling soul-destroying narcotics. I thought how—in no time at all—I had met two women who had affected me powerfully, and that how strange it was that had it not been for the telephone call from Mr. Shadrack in London and my acceptance of his proposals, I might never have loved Fern and—and what—what *were* my feelings for Clare?

"We don't want to hurry you," Garon said with almost a

purr. Here was the man who must have invented the saying 'a steel hand encased by a velvet glove'. Here was King Villainy. A veritable Richard III. I felt more wary of him than his chief, the phoney Mr. Tagore, the *soi-disant* Mr. Dragarno.

I turned contemptuously to my adversary to find that stealthily, unheard by me as I had mused about Clare, several nasty specimens of manhood in old burnouses and equally old tarboushes had closed upon the café. 'Gentlemen' with over-zealous eyes and hard, granite hard, no! tungsten-hard faces, lined, cadaverous, unhealthy—unhealthy indeed was the situation for me. I thought of my attractive news house in the heart of London. The trivial but enjoyable round of pleasant activities in that fair city, and I, Gay Boulevardier, living it up leisurely . . . and now, here in the hot African sun I was in trouble, serious, serious trouble that could end in a death preceded, of course, by excruciating torture. A local custom fraught with myriad experiments and horrifying ideas. Well, if one analysed these things—and this was the analytical age—I suppose my love of adventure, my enjoyment of the sudden bouts of intense physical and mental activity when one's senses were matched against an unscrupulous foe—the way the adrenalin swished excitedly round the flesh that clothed the human frame, all that could be blamed on the fun and games I had had in the Fleet Air Arm. Old Adolf had a lot to answer for!

As these beastly boyos closed on me I wondered about Ginger. I put my trust in Ginger, as I had done in the past. Good old Ginger, try, try somehow, amigo mio, Catesby mine, to keep some sort of check on your old messmate!

They didn't use any violence. They just grouped themselves round me and, at a command in Arabic from Paul Garon, indicated the direction we were to take. We then moved off to the more squalid part of the Medina.

As we left the café, I noticed two of the mob detach themselves and, I imagined, go off back into the café. I wondered if they were after the proprietor. I hoped he had had the sense to scarper.

We made our way through the narrow streets of the Souk in the Medina, past itinerant vendors of carpets, leather goods, local pottery and brass articles, and I got the impression that these men were known to the inhabitants, or at least Paul Garon was; for they seemed to cringe away from our posse as we passed. Surprisingly, when we came to the end of the Souk, there stood two large modern limousines, both had their motors purring ready for an instant getaway, both had European drivers at the wheel. I just had time for an impression of two nasty looking geczers with permanent five o'clock shadow, hard faces and bags under the eyes that a conscientious customs man would also have to chalk.

Then, swiftly, the smooth treatment was over. One of the gang opened the back door of the first car and I felt a sudden kick in the small of the back and fell on the floor of the car, gasping for breath. Some other henchman gave me a swift clout over the head with a cosh or revolver butt and I blacked-out.

When I came to, my hands were bound behind my back, I had been blindfolded and I was lying face down on the floor of the car, the feet of leather-slippered men upon my back. My head throbbed and I was still feeling sick from the sudden kick in the small of my back; every time I breathed I was in pain. 'This', I thought, 'was a nice how-do-you-do'. Well, I had asked for it. Foolish fellow. As they used to say in the Services (and, I imagine, still do) never volunteer!

I didn't know how long I had been unconscious and I had no idea of the direction we had taken. When I was lifted roughly out of the car, soaked with perspiration and still in agony from the head blow and the kick in the back, my only thought was what would be this task I had volunteered to take over from Clare, and could I do it in such a manner that both Captain Evans and I would finally get off scot free. Though I had seen little of Mr. Garon, I was beginning to be very dubious of our chances.

As I was dragged along, my feet scuffing the ground, I tried to get some sort of clue as to my whereabouts. In my mind I had thought I would be taken high up into the foot-

hills and yet I realised I must not be hidebound in this idea. I had seen the phoney Mr. Tagore—self-styled Mr. Dragarno—in Tétuan. It could be we had come back to that town. Then, too, when I had been taken for the abortive drive on my first day in Tangier, a great deal had been mentioned of Larache—or was this, too, just a deceptive feint? The sounds I heard as I was pulled and dragged along were certainly not metropolitan sounds. The hot sun, with no shade, convinced me that the space around was open. Was it a villa? Were we going into a cave? Soon, I'd know and in knowing I wondered about the man who had come to meet me and been side-tracked, Clare's husband. I hoped I really would find him alive.

My captors had dragged me up some stairs, disproving the cave theory, and along a passage and into a room, I was, without any warning, suddenly slumped on to a chair and drenched with the contents of a bucket of cold water. I gasped for breath then, after the shock had passed, enjoyed the coolness and the wetness.

"Refreshing, Trenton?" A voice enquired. The voice of the phoney Mr. Tagore, Mr. Dragarno. "I thought that would help to bring you to your senses."

I decided not to answer. I was still trying mentally to pull myself together.

"All right, Garon," Dragarno continued softly, "you can untie him."

The handkerchief, tightly knotted round my eyes, was removed and I quickly squinted as the sudden glare of daylight harshly struck my eyeballs. Meanwhile my hands were being untied and I had difficulty in getting my arms to move at all, due to the taut way I had been tied and lain in one position on the floorboards of the car. My wrists were bleeding slightly from the chafing and my mouth tasted like the proverbial bottom of a parrot's cage. I felt a mess. Gradually, shaking off the beads of water, accustoming my eyes to the glare, and regaining my breath --and it was still painful to breathe too deeply—I took stock of Mr. Dragarno and his headquarters.

He smiled almost benignly at me, and it seemed fantastic that not more than a few days ago I had stood with him on the balcony of the penthouse I had thought his at the *Marsala* Hotel where I had innocently believed him to be the head of that branch of Interpol which had 'unofficially' employed me. Standing by this urbane character was his aide-de-camp, the tall, and I felt sure, sadistic Paul Garon. Two thugs stood diffidently about and I recognised them as being the two 'charmors' who had tried to crease me en route to Larache.

"Well! Well!" I said unsteadily. "Here we are again. Shouldn't we join hands and sing *Auld Lang Syne*?"

They were not amused.

"Mr. Trenton," Dragarno said, in that unhurried, deceptively quiet voice, "you *have* been a nuisance, but you have been quite clever in protecting your newly-found friend, Mrs. Evans, though you've no idea how you've played into my hands. I was delighted when Garon explained how you turned the tables on him."

Garon took out a cigarette from a too-ornate gold case and tried not to look irritated; clearly, his vanity was such that he did not like to admit to any kind of defeat. I glanced in mock casualness round the room. It was not well furnished and the shutters at the window were clamped shut. It was a hide-out of some kind, but it could be anywhere. I wasn't as clever as I thought for Dragarno added :

"I don't think you will know where you are, Trenton. Not that it matters either way. You are very much here and even if—" he paused for a smile, "the—ah—United States Marines appeared, I don't think they'd rescue you in time."

"I came as a voluntary patient!" I reminded him. He smiled. "I like that," he said. "Patient. Yes! That's nice. Tell me, Trenton, your books—I confess I've never read them—"

"Trash!" ejaculated the unpleasant Paul Garon. I bowed mockingly.

"I've really not much time for reading at the moment. When I retire—"

"With your fortune from dope!" I challenged.

"With my fortune from narcotics," the unruffled Dragarno agreed.

"Are you Hawaiian?" I interrupted again.

"You are observant Trenton, but not quite right. I have the dubious pleasure to be—how is it—er—a hybrid creature sired by—"

I craned forward eagerly. I was very keen to know more about his nationality, but noticing my interest, he deliberately stopped in order to say :

"Where were we?"

"You were asking about the trash he writes," Garon reminded him. He took a delight over that word 'trash'.

"Ah, yes! These books of yours, exactly what sort are they?"

"As Garon so charmingly told you, there're just trash but, like you in your trade, I, too, make the odd kopck." I said.

"You mean you are a best seller?"

"Yes," I said. "It's pure escapist stuff; don't," I said, "I implore you, give me credit for anything sustaining. I think the only profundity I have ever perpetrated was 'the only thing I thanked Civilisation for was the water closet'."

For the first time I had Dragarno perplexed. He couldn't be sure if I was joking and I noticed that he shot a quick look at Garon for some sort of guidance. He didn't get any, except the query, "*Escapist?*" from Garon.

The phoney Tagore was now on safer ground.

"Aha! Don't worry, Garon. Mr. Trenton didn't mean books about escape. A subtle distinction in the English language. I'll explain it to you later."

Garon scowled. Once more he was made to look foolish. He hated it.

"What I really want to know is are your novels ingenious?" Dragarno enquired.

I contemplated this thought for a moment. Were they? I didn't really know. I said :

"In the words of Gilbert Harding, or was it Professor Joad? 'It depends on what you mean by ingenious'."

"Never mind," Dragarno replied silkily, "you'll have to be

ingenious—even if it's the first time. But perhaps before we talk business, you'd like to see your lady friend's husband?"

I glanced swiftly at him. What was he insinuating? I didn't like it and he knew it.

He was amused that his shaft had got home. He added :

"He's been safe and sound here. Very safe and very sound, eh, Paul?"

Garon nodded. He spoke this time in Portuguese to the two stooges who came forward on either side of me and gripped my arms. They were taking no chance of my making a dive for it.

"Sorry if we were a bit rough with you getting here," Garon apologised as we turned to the door.

"Oh well—" I got no further. I received a violent rabbit punch at the nape of the neck which instantly dropped me. The guards enjoyed this immensely.

"You bastard!" I gasped.

"What did you say?"

"I said you bastard."

For reply he kicked me swiftly in the face. I ducked my head in time to take it on the forehead.

"Now! Now!" chided Dragarno in a gentle tone. "We want Garway Trenton in one piece," adding, "*anyway, for the time being!*"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

IN MY mind we would still go down to a dungeon of some sort to see Cuffley-Evans. It was something of a surprise, then, to be led, still gasping from Garon's charining 'present', along the corridor.

In front of a door, crouching Arab-style, a burnous-clad rascal was on guard—his armament an Italian Beretta—no less! He rose swiftly when he saw us coming and bowed almost obsequiously to Dragarno and Garon. Garon produced a bunch of keys on a chain buttoned on his trouser tops and, selecting one, opened the door. Mindful of the fact that I would probably be shoved in first and then kicked in the small of the back again, I slid sideways into the room, causing Garon to laugh softly. I then heard low moaning. I turned to see Evans seated at an ordinary kitchen-type chair, his hands bound behind it, his legs tied tightly to the chair legs. He was clothed in a shirt and trousers. His face was ashen, his lips swollen, parched. His face was contorted with pain. I felt prickles of fear needle the back of my neck as I noticed some kind of weird contraption round his neck. Instinctively I started a dash forward to release him, when my captors, at a sharp word of command, grabbed me.

"Now! Now! Trenton!" Dragarno cautioned, almost in a purr. "Don't get so excited."

"Why, you—you bastards!" I shouted. Garon's smile faded.

"I really must teach you that that is not a nice word to use." He gave an order to the stooges who gripped my arms tightly. I waited for the blow. And Garon waited, knowing that I was waiting. He was quite fiendish, that one! Suddenly, unexpectedly, as I awaited a smash in the face, he kicked me very quickly in the groin. Despite the taut hold the guards had on me, I doubled-up instantly. Between my groans I was dimly aware that Dragarno was angry with

Garon. His creamy voice whiplashed him. I couldn't make out what he said, it was probably Arabic, but whatever it was, he had Garon worried. They set me up on a chair by a table, on the other side of which they had planted Evans, and they held me there, facing Evans. When I was able, I lifted my head and glared at Dragarno.

"Just tell your chum," I said, "that I'll continue to call him a bastard with my dying breath."

I waited for the onslaught. Instead, Dragarno applauded, even if mockingly it was a hand-clap and not a kick in the stomach.

"Bravo, Trenton! Spoken like a true Briton!" He turned to Garon and was scathing. "I told you so, idiot!" He said harshly in French. I could see the effect on Garon. It didn't augur well for me, but I had taken enough of this over-age Teddy-Boy's cavortings.

"What the hell are you doing to poor Evans here?" I asked.

"'Poor Evans' is rather like you, Trenton, not lacking in moral fibre—isn't that the term?"

"Your English is quite remarkable—for a foreigner!" I flung back at him viciously, "but your methods of extortion smack of some less civilised nation!"

For a moment I thought Dragarno was going to emulate Garon and attack me. But he was able to compose himself, instead he said silkily: "Show Trenton how this little contraption works."

Garon nodded; as he approached Evans, that poor man groaned, whispering:

"No! No more. Kill me! Finish me! Let me die."

I found myself cursing and screaming as I fought the men who held me while, quite simply, Garon gave the wooden handle of the tourniquet a slow turn. Evans was past screaming. A little, half-choked whisper trickled through his vice-held throat.

"You swines. You dirty bastards!" I yelled, and in a super-human effort, powered by my disgust and fury at this disgusting, inhuman torture, I flung myself free and attacked

Garon. I got him a cracker with a sharp left and, as his head jolted back, I moved in with a right jab to the body. He grunted and his head tilted forward. I then brought up my left in a positively classical upper-cut. He went down instantly and then, Eton and Balliol be damned, I just jumped on the man and he let out a yell that did me, and I imagine Cuffley-Evans, a power of good.

I fought like a tiger. As Dragarno's stooge ran in, holding his sub-machine gun, I neatly kicked the gun out of his hand, grabbed the chair they had sat me on and I gave one of the stooges such a crack with it on the skull that he crumpled without a murmur. I butted the other in the stomach and he fell, and I made a great dive across the room, slid on my stomach, and grabbed the Beretta. As I did so I felt a violent blow on my arm, a great twinge of pain ran up it. Dragarno had leapt on my arm and, for a second, pinioned it. As I struggled and jerked him off his feet, one of my assailants hit me with something very hard. There was a sensation of a sudden white flash and the impression of a blacksmith's forge, a great roaring in my ears and what seemed to be a series of sparks. As I went down, I remembered as a schoolboy the jokes about being coshed on the head and 'seeing stars'. So this was what it was really like. You did see a sort of series of stars, but by then I was out cold again.

When I came to, I felt as if a steamroller had been over me. These boyos certainly knew all about rough stuff. I could not assess how long I'd been knocked out.

I was back on the chair, this time tied firmly to it, facing poor Cuffley-Evans who kept moaning for water. The charmers had put a jug of the stuff on the table and a tumbler full of it within sight of the Captain. 'Just how bastorical could you get'! I thought, as I tried to inch my chair over to the table. I felt that if I could get to it I could about face and, by raising myself (and, of course, the whole chair), reach the water for Cuffley-Evans. I tugged and strained but seemed not to have the strength to move the chair at all. Now I groaned, not in pain like the Captain but in frustration, for

no matter how I heaved and tugged, I could not get the chair towards him. Then I saw why. I noticed Cuffley-Evans' chair—it was nailed to the ground. I looked down at the legs of mine—yes! They had also been clamped down! Now I, too, began to feel the need for a drink. They were diabolically clever, these drug merchants! About the only good things were that (a) we were breathing and (b) we had not been gagged, and when I say 'we', I meant I, for it wasn't really necessary to gag the poor, half-throttled Captain. I said:

"Cuffley-Evans, can you hear me? Can you understand what I'm saying?"

The gaunt, prematurely-old, suddenly old, made old by torture, Cuffley-Evans made an effort and almost imperceptibly just nodded his head.

"Good! I'm Trenton, Garway Trenton, the fellow you came to meet when they hi-jacked you," I said. I'd given his capture a bit of thought and had concluded that even these people wouldn't have attempted a grab down by the docks in Tangier, so that they must have caught him some other way.

"I suppose they sent a stooge up to you?" I said, "that's how they nabbed you?"

Again, though the effort was great, Evans nodded his head.

"The bastards!" I swore. "Well, the only good news is your wife is well."

There was a flicker in his pained eyes, eyes dulled, lustre-lacking, torrid eyes. My fury at the callousness of our captors mounted.

"Look, Evans!" I began to expostulate excitedly, then I stopped. I stopped abruptly, in the middle of a sentence. I had realised that of course the reason we had not been gagged was that the room was wired up and anything we said would be heard in a hidden microphone.

"I'll be damned if I'll do any talking for you, Dragarno!" I shouted. "And another thing, unless you free that bloody thing from the Captain's throat and give the poor basket a drink—you can ruddy well throttle me, too. In short, comrade, *you've had it!*"

My shouting even stunned Evans. He tried to raise his head, failed, the effort was too much, tried again and made it; then, with what must in view of his condition have been a super-human effort, he essayed a wink. It wasn't much of one but it was an attempt. He looked at me and there was a dog-like, devoted look in his eyes and I could have died in agony for him for the effort he had made.

"Come on, Dragarno! Come on in, Garon! You're wasting your time sitting listening. Come on back, you two twisted sons of bitches! You warped, evil-minded, dirty, rotten stinking—"

But my invective was cut short. The door swung open and Garon ran in and over to me. He carried his gun and he quickly reversed it in his hand so that he held the muzzle. He snarled at me as he raised it to smash the bridge of my nose with the butt. A sharp, rapped-out command stopped him.

"Hurrah for old Dragarno, the phoney Tagore!" I said sarcastically. "Saved by the gong, by jove!"

Behind Dragarno were the usual minions, with plenty of cutlery. Dragarno closed the door and Garon sulkily stepped back.

"The raffish—is that the word?—the gallery-playing Trenton has to be in possession of all his faculties if he wants to get out of here—*ever*!"

"Some gallery to play to!" I derided. "One beaten-up, tortured soldier—"

"Spy. Interpol spy!" Garon spat out accusingly.

"Oh cut out all the velvet glove stuff, Dragarno. I meant what I said. I can take as much as you've given my mate here. One thing's certain, I'm doing nothing till you make it easier for him. Nothing!"

There was a long pause. Outside I heard a donkey braying. I felt a bit of an ass myself at the corny, movie speech, reel ten.

"I believe you!" Dragarno said finally. He spoke to one of the guards. The tourniquet was slowly untwisted. The cruel ropes fell away from the Captain's flesh-scarred neck. His head flopped. Another man took the glass of water and I

held my breath when Garon took it from him. I waited expectantly for Garon to hurl it in my face, just to spite us, just to torture Evans a little more. Instead he held up Evans' head and let him avidly drink the water. As he did so he turned to me with a sneer.

"That fooled you, Trenton!" he said.

"You're not kidding, warthog!" I retorted. This time he ignored my remark.

"Good!" I said, "well done. Now we can make heap plenty palaver!" I joked. I was feeling better, feeling fine. "What do I have to do?" I demanded.

"It's very simple. I expect Mrs. Cuffley-Evans could have done it, but I think you will—being a writer—be more ingenious."

"Yes? Why ingenious?" I innocently enquired.

"Because, my dear Garway Trenton, you have to kill the *real* Mr. Tagore!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I blinked at Dragarno.

"Eh?"

The urbane head of the Dope Ring grinned with delight at my astonishment.

"Kill the real Mr. Tagore?" I repeated oafishly.

"That's right. He's a clever man. He knows too much."

"And you expected Clare—er—Mrs. Cuffley-Evans to do that?"

"Why not?" He glanced at the Captain and his eyes travelled from the red welts around his neck, where the cruel rope had scarred and seared, to the hand tied to the back of the chair, with the finger missing. He didn't have to make his point any plainer.

"I got the message," I said laconically, "but how would she do it?"

"That was her problem," Dragarno replied blandly, "now it's yours."

"But—even if I did kill Tagore for you—what guarantee have we—Evans and I—that you'll fulfil your part of the bargain?" I asked.

"None," said Dragarno exuberantly, "none at all!"

"In that case, you'd better get on with the torture—we've nothing to lose."

At this Garon stepped forward, though there was something snake-like in the way he moved—he sort of 'undulated'. He smirked at me as he said:

"You've got plenty to lose, Trenton, plenty."

"Yes?"

"Oh yes. By the way, do you dictate?"

"Dictate? It seems to me you're doing the dictating at the moment."

"I mean your novels. Do you dictate or write them in long-hand?"

"I write them out."

"Left hand or right hand?"

I hadn't perceived his drift. Idiotically, perhaps even a little proudly, I replied: "I'm ambidextrous."

"Tut!" said Garon, "that's even worse, isn't it?"

He looked ominously to where Dragarno had looked to the Captain's missing finger.

"You'd have to learn to dictate," he said, adding imperturbably, "that's, of course, if you ever wrote again."

"But," I said, trying to see this scheme of theirs in all its angles, to see what the loophole was, where the escape hatch—if any—might be. "When I go off to do this delightful deed, how will you be sure that I don't double-cross you?"

"Doubt the word of a fine, noble Englishman?" Garon said with fine sarcasm. "But just in case you weren't the decent Public School type we believe you to be, dear, dear School prefect Trenton, you are forgetting we still have your new friend, the gallant Captain Cuffley-Evans."

Evans could not suppress a moan.

"You see," Garon continued, "he doesn't relish the thought, does he? It's all right for you. You've just arrived. You're still full of—what's the expression?—urine and vinegar—you haven't been—er—subjected to any of our—er—interesting *experiments*!"

"You—!"

"Careful, Trenton!" he snapped, taking a step nearer. "Be very, very careful!"

Now Dragarno again intervened.

"But my colleague hasn't quite told you all, Trenton," Dragarno said. "Whereas we would take Mrs. Cuffley-Evans back to Tangier to do the—er—job for us—"

"How? But how?"

"That would be up to her," Dragarno said. "There are many methods of killing a man and in her—her frenzy to free her husband here—*having seen him*, you understand, I think she would have found one."

"You fiends!"

"My! My! You sound positively Victorian, Trenton!"

"But you asked her the impossible!"

"Not at all. She could well—shoot him in his office—er—drive her car at him—"

"Like you tried on me, once."

"True. Or, let's see, in Steinbeck's novel on Occupied Norway—"

"*The Moon is Down*?"

"Thank you, yes. In *The Moon is Down*, didn't one of the Norwegian girls take a Nazi to bed with her—and a pair of scissors?"

This was enough. Even Evans, despite all he had gone through, despite his fatigue, tried hard to struggle to reach out at his tormentor.

Dragarno smiled at Garon.

"We seem to have touched them on the raw," he observed to his tall, dissipated lieutenant who was reflecting on the obvious physical charms of Clare.

"A very attractive woman, Mrs. Evans. Very attractive indeed. In some ways I'm sorry you are here, Trenton, instead—"

"Will you shut up about my wife!" screamed the Captain. Somehow or other he managed to rap it out. We all looked surprised.

"My! My!" Garon said, "the Gallant Captain is recovering." He took a step towards Evans who began to gasp protestingly.

"Listen you evil slug, if you so much—" I shouted impotently.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" Dragarno said with the composure of a chairman at a City meeting. "Just one minute!"

We waited for Sir Oracle to speak.

"There's one thing we hadn't told you, Trenton. Whereas we were prepared to let Mrs. Evans go back to do the job for us in Tangier, you are going to do it from here."

"By remote control!" I retorted sarcastically.

"Precisely!" was Dragarno's fantastic reply.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you will evolve a plot, author Trenton,

on a way for our agents there to do the job for you."

"But that's impossible!" I shouted.

"It had better not be impossible. 'Nothing is impossible', who said that, Trenton?"

"Look, you raving lunatic! How can I possibly dream up a way of killing Tagore sitting here in some remote hideout? How? How?" I shouted.

"You are a writer, use your ingenuity."

"But this just isn't possible, I —"

"Then our conversation is at an end." Dragarno made as if to conclude our talk by going towards the door. "You know, Garon," he said, as a parting shot, "I expect Trenton could take anything you devised."

"You're dam' right!" I bluffed to keep the tremor out of my voice. I doubted very much if I had ever been so scared before.

"Therefore," Dragarno added, "we might get better results if Trenton watched Evans have a little more—er—psychiatric treatment."

"What's the point? You can't get him to tell you any secrets and I don't know any. I'm not a British Agent. I know nothing."

Dragarno pretended to be surprised. "Oh we realise we're wasting our time, of course."

"A stalemate was the term you used at Chauen, wasn't it, Trenton?" Garon added.

"This would be, well, something to *amuse* Garon."

"And, Trenton, I amuse in the *oddest* manner!" Garon said.

"If—if I think of something. What about the guarantee?" I shouted.

"Don't be so noisy, Trenton. It doesn't become you!" Dragarno said, asking: "Are you trying to bargain with me?"

"That's why I substituted for Mrs. Evans," I replied. "If she had taken on the job you would have freed her husband, wouldn't you?" There was fear in my heart as I said this. I knew these villainous men only too well; but, surprisingly, Dragarno replied.

"Yes. That's true. All right, then," he said obligingly. "You kill Tagore, and we'll let Captain Cuffley-Evans go."

"What proof will I have?" I countered.

"Don't worry. We'll work something out we mutually agree," he assured me.

"And me? When I've killed Tagore and Evans, here, is released. What about me?"

"Now that is an interesting question!" the vulpine Garon said, with an evil smile. "What about that, Chief?"

'Chief' Dragarno ran his hands—long, sinister-looking hands—through his jet-black hair. Hair that hadn't quite lost the crinkle he had so obviously tried to eliminate. My fate seemed a foregone conclusion of torture and finally death, buried in the deep six of a land that wasn't even my own—and perhaps not even a wooden overcoat.

"It is interesting, Garon. Very. And we must ponder over it. It might be that when we've played a little with Trenton we might hand him over to the authorities—there's nothing like authority, you know, Garon. Yes, I feel it might be our duty as public-spirited citizens to hand Mr. Trenton over to justice. I mean we would be able to prove he had killed Tagore—wouldn't we?"

I mouthed a nice set of obscenities at him.

"Now! Now! Trenton. I might be able to lip-read!" Dragarno said.

"I hope you can, Jerk!" I flung back at him. "And anyway, I haven't killed Tagore yet," I added.

"You'd better get on with it, Trenton. Very soon. Think out something nice and ingenious, won't you?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"I'LL THINK of something," I said, with an authority I did not feel. Dragarno nodded. He gave a curt order and once again I was seized and was about to be bundled out. I yelled for them to desist.

"Where are you taking me?"

"What the devil's it got to do with you?" Garon demanded imperiously.

"I'll work this thing out in here—with Captain Cuffley-Evans," I said.

"Oh no you won't!" Garon retorted.

"Look!" I replied forthrightly. "Up to a point I'm your prisoner—"

" 'Up to a point' ! That's good !"

"Either I stay here—with Evans freed—just as I am—or get out your stilettos and make with the fancy carvings !" I bluffed.

At this, Dragarno and Garon held a short conversation in what I imagined to be Arabic, finally Dragarno turned to me.

"All right, Trenton. But we want results—ingenious results." They all turned to go.

"One second !" I called out. "I'll need paper and pencil and a lot more to drink."

"Why paper and pencil?" Garon enquired.

"That's what you use when you write, or can't you?" I said tauntingly. He wasn't exactly enamoured of me.

"You've been reading too many thrillers, Trenton," Garon said. "Don't think you'll be able to drop little rescue notes through the shutter. It just won't work."

"I was a kid once, Garon, but I grew up. I didn't remain mentally stunted, like some people !" I retorted coolly. "I want paper and pencil. I may want to write down my ideas."

"It's a reasonable request," Dragarno said, then benignly, "of course we own the copyright of anything you write

Trenton! You never know," he said, "I might even turn honest one day, and go into the publishing business!"

I grinned. He was a sinister character but, unlike the despicable Garon, he had a sense of humour, which excused him a particle.

"Tricky to do when you're swinging from a tree at Tyburn!" I retorted.

"Trenton you talk too much!" Garon cut in. "Just think up a way to kill Tagore," he added.

"I'll try."

"Try," he said, "and keep trying. Or we might pick up Mrs. Evans and bring her here--to join you."

I could see that the Captain was about to give Garon a piece of his mind, so I cut in quickly with an almost obsequious: "Leave it to me, Garon—just bring me the utensils—and as Latymer Court taught you—I mean the paper, pencil and a lot to drink," I said.

At last they all moved out and Cuffley-Evans was about to say something. Quickly I spoke in pig Latin, hoping he caught on.

"Ixnay!" I said, "onay alkingtay!"

He had been tortured to a point where his mind wasn't reacting and he merely blinked enquiringly at me. I took a chance that Garon or Dragarno hadn't got back to their listening-post.

"Microphones!" I whispered. This was my real reason for requesting paper and pencil; once this arrived, I could reasonably converse with the Captain. I did not have long to wait, very soon there was the sound of a key in the lock and bolts were pulled back.

"They aren't planning on us leaving by the door!" I quipped

Evans gave a wry smile. Then in came the bloke who had sat by the driver on the abortive trip to Larache, when they had tried to rub me out. It occurred to me, these wouldn't bother to listen-in when their own people were delivering my request merchandise, and so, once more, I took a chance.

"Wotcher Herman!" I said, quite affably, "been taking any more tourists for a ride?"

"My name is not Herman," he replied.

"No kidding. You look like a Herman," I continued. "You also look as if you like snow," I added, "and I don't mean that white stuff that melts when the sun shines!"

If Herman understood he acted well enough. He was covered by the gent with the tommy gun at the door. He plonked down some typing paper, a pencil and a further carafe of water.

"What, no Lucky Strikes?" I wisecracked. No one thought it funny. "You don't have to laugh. In the words the Americans find so quaint, I am merely trying to keep my pecker up." I was burbling away, trying to see if any of these men were bribable—and doubted it.

"You interested in photography—Leica cameras? Got a wife? French fashions interest her? I'll need more paper than that. What's the dollar market like these days—you got dollars? dollars buy everything."

Herman looked at me, frowning as he did so. I wondered if I had struck on something that had interested him.

"Look, chum," I said, quickly pressing home my attack in the hope that he was vulnerable. "Whatever you need I—"

But that was as far as I got. With great deliberation 'Herman' spat right in my face, turned and walked out. As I removed the spittle, bright orange-coloured from the betel nut he had recently been chewing, Evans said in a whisper:

"I thought you were wasting your time!"

"Well, it was worth a try but I must get Herman to take a gander at Commercial T.V. I'm sure there must be something good on it to take the scorch out of his breath!" As I spoke I quickly wrote on the first piece of paper:

'Anything private—write it!'

Cuffley-Evans nodded. I poured him a further drink and said, "Clare's fine."

"Good! I'm glad!" he said. Even taking into consideration his condition, I felt this was said in a matter-of-fact way. I let it pass.

"How will you go about this?" he enquired.

"I'm not sure yet," I replied. Meanwhile, he had written and no doubt it was painful for him to write: 'Can you?'

"I'll have to do a bit of pacing up and down," I replied. "Hope it won't irritate you!" As I said this I wrote down: **TO KILL YET TO WARN—TRICKY!**

Cuffley-Evans nodded and essayed a grimace. Every minute out of the romantic halter that these thugs had put him in he was growing more at ease and colour was returning slowly to his cheeks. I was able to take stock of him now. He was younger than I had thought he would be and it occurred to me that he was younger than Clare. He was fair-headed and he had a forthright look, his eyes were brown but not particularly thoughtful—yet, if he was with Interpol, he must have been pretty bright. I found myself wondering what Clare had seen in him and then mentally kicked myself. It was no concern of mine and yet. . . .

I tore our pencilled notes into tiny fragments and slipped them into the top of one of my socks. The Captain nodded approvingly.

"Peter," I said, "It is Peter, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"Peter, I've got to do my homework now. You take a nap on the table—I shan't need all of it."

He moved wearily to the table.

"I just want to thank you—for everything," he said. It made me recall the last occasion I had seen Clare, at Chaunc. I nodded, embarrassed at his deliberateness, saying: "Skip it. In a way, it was my fault. If you hadn't come to meet me. . . ."

"I cocked that up all right, Trenton," he admitted. "Fell right into the trap. If we ever get out, I guess they'll reduce me to the ranks—it'll be Harry Chuckers for me."

"Nonsense!" I said heartily, pointing to the corridor, to remind him of the hidden microphone. "Now," I said, "my homework!" He nodded and, with my assistance, clambered heavily onto the table and lay on it.

I was feeling pretty rotten myself. My head and ribs where

I had been kicked by Garon and Company ached, and my forehead, where Garon had missed my face when I ducked, throbbed badly and was bleeding a lot so that little rivulets trickled into my eyebrows. Furthermore, the knife wound I had sustained at the *Juany* had opened in the *fracas*. We were a sorry couple—Evans and I.

I began to pace up and down the room, trying to get a slant on this formidable task. To conceive a plot on a way in which to kill a man—a man well protected—by remote control wasn't easy. Then, too, I'd got to think up an antidote, as it were, to save him.

'Well', I told myself, 'you earn your keep—your West End flat, your monogrammed shirts and your Aston Martin car by the words you write. Think, man, think. Find those magic words that spell out 'plot'.'

I paced up and down restlessly. Words! Words! Words! Wasn't it Dorothy Thompson who said that 'words advance under no panoply of banners; they go unarmed. Millions of them are ephemeral; the paper on which they are written today lights tomorrow's fire. They fall into the wastepaper basket; they crumble into dust; they are forgotten upon dusty shelves. But time and again in history they have opened doors to prison.' True, dear Dorothy, and somehow I had to find words to open prison doors—and that wasn't the half of it!

To work! But how to go about it? A man many miles away had to be killed—killed ingeniously. That was the hypothetical case—with this rider: I wanted to save him and, paradoxically, if I saved him—then I died! A happy thought for a hot Moroccan day! Well, I had brought it all on myself. I had accepted a 'dare' and that was that. I had never longed so much for London. As Doctor Johnson had remarked, 'When a man tires of London, he tires of life.' And I certainly wasn't tired of it either. If there were flowers about, I wanted to be able to smell them!

In that hot, fetid atmosphere, in that intrigue-ridden, evil place, I thought of London. Things were going on in London as usual, it seemed astonishing to think so. On Commercial

T.V. millions were being told that PONG was the *greatest* for washing your smalls, the newspaper hoardings inevitably would carry the headlines "M.C.C. Shocks." There were always M.C.C. shocks every summer. Lily Mertens, my 'daily', was probably helping herself to a tot of my brandy—purely for medicinal reasons, of course. Green Park would be wonderfully green and the sky decorated with some delicious-looking clouds. The gay, red buses would be trundling around Eros. At the *Caprice* they would be serving fraises des bois, a delicious steak *diane* at *Pastoria's* and lobster Nuberg, *sans doute*, at *Antoine's*. Teenagers would be jiving as Ottillie Patterson sent it out solid with Chris Barber and his jazzmen at Humph's. Maybe the sun would be gleaming through Evie Hone's stained glass in the college chapel and the sound of singing might be coming from the procession of boats outside.

At the Slade, Madeleine might be listening to Professor Coldstream criticising the vacation paintings.

Imp-face kids would be chewing fried chips from newspapers despite the fact that it was the cherry season. English cherries and British roses!

People would be looking at the Manet at the Courtauld Institute. A B.E.A. plane would be touching down at London Airport. And at Fontenham's my honeybee, Charity Stockton, would be serving the Debs with banana splits. It would be nice to be zooming in the Aston with Charity on her afternoon off, to Cambridge with tea at Grantchester and thoughts of Rupert Brooke, now out of fashion but due to replay a return date of poetic popularity perhaps ere long.

I tried to dismiss my town, the metropolis (the centre of the world despite the Americans' claim that New York was that), and to concentrate on the Machiavellian plot I had to weave, like Mr. Spider. Whoever had to do the dirty deed also had to get in to see him first, and Tagore was well guarded. Whoever it was would be subjected to infinite scrutiny. It was, therefore, no good to send a man in with a dispatch case—in which he had stashed away a nice Smith and Wesson Heavy Duty Police gun. An invidious canker of

doubt began to gnaw away at my brain. Maybe I just couldn't evolve a plot that would kill Tagore and, anyway, I didn't want to kill him. I needed a plot, a counter-plot and an escape hatch to get Peter and me out of Hades, across the river Styx—and into the palm trees, to parody Papa Hemingway. It was all very well for the thriller writers, the serial kings. They were able to truss up their lantern-jawed hero and then, in next week's episode, with a superhuman effort, he frees himself from his bonds and is on his way. Whereas, in reality, there was Peter and there was I, Garway Trenton, secretly held tautly as in a vice. So think, Mr. Trenton, think! Thoughts evanescent, ideas chimeral, plots puny, plots pathetic, passed through my pate, all were putrid . . . as I paced, my mind wandered again. It wasn't only London and Londoners I wanted to see again. It wasn't only Charity Stockton. I wanted to see that funny Fern with her façade of tainted armour, the pseudo-tough dame with the contemptuous eyes, the hurt eyes and the sudden warm smile, the smile that she dearly wanted to use more often, instead of some shining, Sunday special garment, brought out only and donned for unique occasions. Fern, who spouted poetry and had lovely thoughts, but who sang in cheap cabarets in honky-tonks all over the world.

I wanted to see Clare again, too. Very much. It was wrong, of course. But I did. What two contrasting women I had met in my few days in North Africa! And how strange that I should find them both so attractive. Attraction by contrast? Had I mormonistic tendencies? It was often said that men were by nature polygamous. Men and women found excitement playing with fire and Clare was highly inflammable as far as I was concerned. But Clare—grave-eyed, English rose, classical beauty—Clare was married, untouchable, to me *verboden*. I thought again of her goodbye to me at Chauen. 'Her voice was ever soft, gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman.' I was jarred out of my reverie by Peter saying:

"You've stopped pacing up and down, is that a good thing?"

"Not necessarily," I replied.

"Where were you?" he enquired.

"I was thinking of your wife," I confessed. There was a silence. Did he suspect that I was a little in love with her? Then he said :

"Oh!"

No more. And I couldn't tell from his tone whether he had known that it was inevitable; or that men always fell in love with her—that he was sick and tired of it; that he was possessive as the devil or that it didn't matter. Anyway, we were trussed like turkeys, and it was useless to contemplate things metaphysical or carnal any more. I tried to concentrate on the job in hand. Like Felix the Cat, I kept on walking. Up and down, up and down.

Quite a time had elapsed when the key was turned in the lock and the bolts withdrawn from the door. Two surly Arabs entered and slapped two unappetising-looking *cous-cous* dishes on tin plates onto the table. Behind them, menacingly, was the boyo with the Beretta. He looked as if he had a very itchy trigger finger. The stooges didn't even leave us knife, fork or spoon. They didn't want to give us anything that might help.

"You will," I said as I set to, "excuse my table manners, Peter. I'm no dab at eating without the usual tools."

But Peter did not answer. From the way he grabbed the food with his hands and stuffed it into his mouth it was clear that those devils had been nigh on starving him. Nor was he conscious of the loss of his finger. It had happened and he had acquired almost the fatalism of a Moslem. It was the Will of Allah. I hoped that it was the Will of Allah (or for that matter Jehovah, or Buddha or Christ) that we got out of that stifling hell hole.

I pretended I wasn't hungry, so that Peter could have my mess of potage, too. Then I started pacing up and down again. Peter ate noisily and with relish, you would have thought it was something whipped up by the *Au père de Nico* in Chelsea. Another hour passed. To Proust 'an hour is not merely an hour; it is a vase filled with scents and sounds, with

plans and climatic differences', but right then, to me, an hour was an hour. I walked and walked, trying out, tossing out, eliminating, rejecting ideas, sterile, barren, foolish ideas, without success.

Finally: "Is this disturbing you?" I asked Peter.

"After what they did to me?" he replied. I grinned. "I know, it drives my secretary mad," I said.

"Maybe you won't be bothering her further!" he continued.

"Thanks for the reminder. Don't worry. I'll think of something."

"I hope so."

"If not, we'll go down with all guns blazing!"

"I don't see how," he said, honestly.

"Remember Colonel Fawcett?"

Peter shook his head.

"The Fawcett papers," I reminded him of the famous trek through the jungle.

"Oh yes!"

"Said Colonel Fawcett 'at least once in every man's life, death looks him straight in the eyes—and passes on.' This could be it!" I added, I hoped, with conviction.

"I don't mind so much now. I suppose that's because I'm no longer alone."

"Don't worry, kiddo," I said with a cheerfulness I didn't feel, "you are too young to die," and here I spoke up for the benefit of anyone listening, "furthermore, Dragarno and Garon know that there'd be such an unholy stink if. . .!"

I was bluffing and I knew it. I hoped Peter Cuffley-Evans did not.

He seemed to have forgotten the 'mike', he was almost in a reverie as he spoke.

"Courage is a funny thing," he said. "You admire it in someone else, you mentally put yourself in their position and you think 'I couldn't do that', while they admire you for doing something you do and don't think especially hair-raising."

He had not spoken at such length before this, nor had he

been so revealing. It was innocuous talk that didn't matter if it was overheard so, encouragingly, I asked :

"How do you mean?"

"Well what were you, R.N.?"

"Yes—Fleet Air Arm."

"I bet you got a bang out of flying."

"Of course."

"Well, I was tanks and—"

"Tanks ! Not for me, chumsie !"

"That's my point," he said, "the other bloke's job. My dentist was a submariner, I wouldn't be a submariner for all the *cous-cous* in Morocco. Yet he thought the idea of dropping out of a 'plane—being a paratrooper—would give him the screaming abdals. See what I mean?"

"Your point is that we all have an Achilles heel—of fear?"

"I don't mean that we all have a streak of heroism. I mean, different men are fearful of different things!"

"I wish I knew what that wicker-basket Garon was frightened of!" I said loudly, daringly. But no one came hurtling in.

"You like provoking them, don't you?" Peter said, as if plopping me under a microscope.

"Yes. They are evil men. It's an evil trade—this dope smuggling. I could probably 'accept' a smart gang of thieves, but when it's something despicable, something that utterly destroys men's souls—no, I'm against it with everything I've got!" I imparted.

"Which," said Peter wryly, "is a pencil and a few pieces of paper."

"But," I said, trying to develop some sort of argument, some sort of thought-provoking discussion that just might give me a lead, "talking about fear, I knew one man who at forty, a D.S.O. to boot, never lost his fear of the dark."

"I don't find that surprising," Peter replied. "I suppose it's one of the very first fears one has as a child. I'm sure you remember whistling in the dark to keep cheerful. Like the song in *The King and I*, how did it go?" Surprisingly Peter

broke into song, the one about whistling when you were afraid. It was a croak, but somehow he managed it.

But my mind was back delving, probing, racing around the words whistling in the dark. Very faintly a little bell had tinkled down memory lane. I broke into his song :

"Whistling in the Dark. Whistling in the Dark—now where—? There's something there that gives me an idea . . ." I began, pacing up and down again, very quickly, and Peter stopped singing. Suddenly I stopped pacing.

"That's it! I've got it!" I shouted excitedly. "A play in which a very funny actor, Ernest Truex, played. It was called *Whistling in the Dark*. Yes!"

"*Whistling in the Dark*?" Peter echoed. "I don't see . . .?"

But I broke in with another shout of glee. "Peter," I said excitedly. "I just might have a buzz!"

"Really? *Really*, Trenton?" The childish way in which he grabbed at my tiny life-line of hope was touching. I really had to get this lad back to Clare in one piece, I thought. I said :

"It's just a glimmer. No more than a glimmer. But this chap Truex, in this play—how marvellous you should have used that expression—whistling in the dark—was captured by thugs—and he had to devise a method of killing off some American big-wig, I can't remember quite why. But I'm sure he had to. It'll come to me soon. So please excuse the raging lion act," I said, as I began to tramp up and down again. Peter avidly watched me.

Suddenly I got it.

"Wam bam, alackazam!" I shouted jubilantly. "I think I've got it!" I said.

"What happened?" Peter asked.

"If my memory serves me correctly, in *Whistling in the Dark*, the hero had to murder a Yankee big business tycoon, or senator, on a long-distance train. He evolved the idea of the crooks injecting a dose of insulin, or some such stuff, into the tycoon's toothpaste!"

Peter Cuffley-Evans looked at me in astonishment.

I thought 'a lot of suspense followed because, having

devised this method of destruction, the hero had to escape and get to the train to warn the Senator before he cleaned his teeth!' This antidote I *hadn't* got, nor was I sure that I would be able to! (Truex, I remembered, had a radio in the room and in some way he fixed it to the telephone wires and got help to come to him), but I had enough to get on with and I had, up my sleeve, a twisteroo that made me smile.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"Yes. This is it!" I said to Peter. I ran to the door. I banged and kicked the door until the gent with the Beretta opened the small grille they had built into it and peered in.

"Señor Dragarno! Señor Dragarno!" I demanded. It was possible he was briefed because he nodded and, in a moment or two, Dragarno entered, followed by Garon.

It was obvious that Dragarno was intrigued at the possibility of my being able to give him a plan, whereas Garon was clearly sceptical.

"Well?" Dragarno said, enquiringly.

"You've thought of something? It's not possible—you've only had a few hours," Garon said, lip curling disdainfully. He had the same look on his pan that a deodorant firm's advert. might use, 'Someone near me certainly needs No-Smello!'

"'A poor thing, but mine own'," I said, adding, with semi-concealed relish, "as you will remember from your Latymer Upper School days, a quotation from the Bard."

Garon chose to ignore this, and I chose not to reveal the source of my plan.

"Tell us what you have conceived," Dragarno curtly ordered.

"O.K. It's this. Firstly are you able to obtain any tincture of nicotine?" I had remembered Insulin could now be detected. Strychnine was worse and curare had to be injected to be any good.

"Tincture of nicotine?" Garon repeated.

"Yes—or better still, one of the ordinary nicotine horticultural sprays—strength about 95%," I said. "You see," I went on, "it's odourless, colourless and tasteless, but a deadly poison. Detection is a matter of extreme difficulty. Death within moments!"

"We can get it," Dragarno said, with complete assurance.

"Good ! Secondly, would you be able to get into Tagore's house?"

"I doubt it."

"Pity."

"Why?"

"Well, put it another way, could you bribe someone to steal a small object from his house and then replace it without his knowing?"

"That is possible."

"Well, you'd better, because the plan won't work unless you do!" I said, speaking as if I were Dragarno and he my prisoner. I was beginning to enjoy myself.

Garon broke in testily. "What is the plan?" he enquired.

"It's simple but foolproof, so your hired assassins won't hungle it," I said, big-headedly, "it's really highly ingenious."

"We'll judge that when—!" Garon snapped.

"Oh, you'll like it. You'll like it very much. In fact, I think you'll probably make a deal with me to stay on and work out all your murders," I said airily. They gave each other puzzled looks, not at all sure if I were pulling their legs. Unseen by them, or the bearded boyo with the Beretta, Peter gave me a quick wink.

"Get on with it man!" Dragarno said. Even he was becoming impatient.

"Right! I want your flunkies to get into Tagore's house and steal from the bathroom—"

"The bathroom?" Dragarno repeated, but incredulously.

"Yes— the bathroom. He is to steal Tagore's tube of toothpaste."

"Toothpaste?"

"Precisely. When the tube has been taken, the nicotine is injected by a hypodermic needle into the nozzle of the tube. As I said to you before, it is odourless, colourless and tasteless. Two drops is enough. The top is screwed on. The toothpaste is replaced in the bathroom and what happens?"

Before I could tell them, Garon had said it for me, with glee.

"Tagore comes in to clean his teeth, he spreads the

poisonous toothpaste on the toothbrush, cleans his teeth, and caramba! he is dead!"

"Precisely! Caramba—he is dead!" I agreed. "Furthermore," I added, "no one can detect how or why it has happened."

A poignant silence followed, and then Dragarno smiled and grunted approval.

"Very ingenious. Very ingenious indeed."

"Thank you, chief," I said pontifically, "I knew you'd like it."

Dragarno and Garon were looking at one another, considering my idea with obvious relish. They were so intrigued it almost gave me the chance to rush the door—if only the bearded boy hadn't a Beretta, then, too, how many more of them were there in the house? I didn't think we dared risk it.

"Yes," Dragarno said. "I think it will do."

"Good!" I replied heartily. "I'm so glad. I told you I knew my stuff."

Garon's mood changed. He turned on me, saying harshly. "We'll congratulate you when Tagore's dead."

"Thank you," I replied.

"Goodbye for the time being, Trenton. It could be you have solved this quite neatly," Dragarno said.

They went out and the bolts were shot home again. I looked at Peter Cuffley-Evans and I grinned, but, to my complete astonishment, he did not grin back.

"You bloody murderer!" he said accusingly.

"Eh?"

"That was fiendishly clever. Diabolical. Do you think I want to exchange my life for Tagore's?"

I quickly put my right index finger to my lips and winked. I jerked my head for him to come over to the table.

"Don't be such a mutt!" I said loudly but taking up the pencil, I wrote on the stationery:

NOT TO WORRY, HE'S GOT FALSE TEETH.

I was pleased to see that Peter's first thoughts were for the safety of his Chief. For a moment or two he had looked at me,

baffled by my notion, and then he had grinned and said :

"That's marvellous. That's really marvellous."

"Aw shucks !" I gagged Texan-style. Then the full realisation of what it meant dawned on him.

"Oh ! But—but you mean it won't work ?" he whispered.

"Not on Tagore, unless he keeps his teeth in a glass. If they swiped those and dunked them in the nicotine the contact with his tongue could—no it couldn't ! The water would dilute it."

"You mean that they'll come back and—"

"Precisely !" I murmured laconically.

Peter Cuffley-Evans sat heavily down on a chair.

"Oh God !"

"Now don't worry. I'll suggest that they go back and put some of the stuff on the lip of an envelope, I expect he does that for himself or has he a secretary?"

Peter leapt instantly to his feet in a startled fashion.

"My God !" he exclaimed. "Don't let them touch Ruth !"

My eyebrows went skywards enquiringly. I paused to consider this new piece of information.

"Then we won't take a chance on that—or the back of a postage stamp, the gum on that, if treated, could—"

But Peter had crossed to me, his face creased with anxiety.

"Look, Trenton, there are men and women at our place, decent, kind, honest people, don't, I beg you—"

"Now ! Now ! It isn't panic stations yet. Keep that jolly old British stiff upper-lip stuff, there's a decent chap !" I gently chided.

"But what have you achieved by your scheme, Trenton ?"

Peter enquired, still in some anguish. "All you've done is to antagonise them—you seem to thrive on that."

"Yes. Sorry about that. Blame my education. I was the jape king—chief prankster of the arrested development and mentally stunted. The pranksters at Greyfriars had nothing on me !"

"Be serious, Trenton. What was the idea ?"

"The idea, my Beamish Boy, was to *stall*. Don't you see, it's going to take them some time—some time to get the

thing organised, get access to someone who'll take a bribe? Get the chappie to grab the toothpaste. Then the chappie finds out there isn't any. He reports back. They—"

"But," broke in Peter, "supposing there's some sort of dental plate stuff and they decide your plan's a good one and they send their men back to get *that* and treat it?"

"Then Tagore's a goner and you'll frame me as murderer and they'll let you go," I said glibly.

"I doubt that. I doubt that very much!" he said, bitterly.

"Nevertheless, all this takes time and it's time we need."

"Why?" Now he was contemptuous. "You know as well as I do that these are utterly unscrupulous men—men without any grain of compassion. They just don't know the meaning of the word. If I were ever traced—which I doubt—at the first suspicion of a rescue, we'll have had it. All the Interpol will discover are two unrecognisable corpses—mutilated, if my guess is any good, beyond recognition!"

"That was quite a mouthful and, if I may say so, very dramatic. Do the Interpol lads and lassies indulge in amateur theatricals? I think you'd do well, Peter, very well," I said. But I wasn't going to calm him by that sort of talk. He crossed to me and, for the first time, he made play with his hand. He held it up a few inches from my face so that the severed stump of the missing finger, roughly hewn but healthily healing, was very, very close.

"No, Garway Trenton, we haven't the time nor have we the inclination for amateur theatricals," he said soberly.

I was sorry Peter was narked at me, but I had every reason to believe that I had done the right thing. They would have given us another hour, perhaps, but no more. If I hadn't produced some plan, even one that was a duff one, we were due for the old hot seat. Meantime with Dragarno and Garon—the brains of the organisation—out of the way, there was always a chance that something might break in our favour and, without these little big shots, we could play it in such a way we could win. Meanwhile, despite the Moroccan heat, the atmosphere in our 'cell' was icy.

"Try to take it easy, Evans," I counselled. "I'll still try to

work out a scheme when they return with the bad news."

Evans looked at me contemptuously. It was a look which clearly indicated that, as a writer, I was strictly gash. We seemed to be incarcerated for ages, time dragged interminably by and subtle ways of killing off the honourable Interpol Chief eluded me. I guess I was strictly U/S. It was a pity, a great pity.

Since the shutters were barred from the outside, and our watches had been taken from us, we lived permanently by electric light and had, therefore, lost all sense of time. We were dozing fitfully some hours later when there was the sound of approaching feet, a muttered word from the corridor, and the key was turned in the lock and the bolts drawn back. We stretched our aching limbs and wearily straightened up.

"This," whispered Peter dramatically, "is it!"

I thought quickly of the idea of the gum on the envelope or a postage stamp. I might even see if they could fix his sherry glass. In any case, I musn't appear at all worried, or let them see that I had deliberately sent them off on a wild goose chase. The door was flung open and a bearded rogue in a burnous with the hood up, worn not unlike a duffle coat, entered carrying the two tin plates containing another meal for us.

"Oh lordie! Not another of those lousy *cous-cous*!" I said, relieved that the visitors were not the Big Boys.

"Well, that gives us a little more time," Peter said, voicing what I was thinking. The guard with the Beretta stood at the doorway, yawning. The man with the two tin plates approached the table and then, quite suddenly, he spun round and hurled both plates quickly at the sentry, making a dive for his feet as he did so.

The sentry instantly lifted his hands to shield his face and toppled heavily to the floor as the man in the burnous reached his feet and yanked him off them.

"Good old Ginger!" I shouted. "Quickly, Evans!"

I had rushed forward and grabbed the Beretta, then, as Ginger and the guard rolled over on the floor, I tapped the

guard smartly with the butt of the Beretta. He grunted and slumped to the deck.

"Not what the Marquess of Queensberry would have called ethical, but effective!" I quipped joyously. "Peter, meet Ginger Bier, an old messmate of mine. Well done, Catesby!" I complimented Ginger. "Tie that guard up, Peter; Ginger, you stay outside in your disguise and point in at us. We don't want the next chap to slam the lock on us, but we do want a clear way out!"

We hadn't long to wait, just as Peter began tying the guard, who was out for the count, to one of the chairs, a colleague, brandishing a revolver, came hurrying down the corridor, shouting.

Ginger, in his burnous, pointed into the room and the guard, revolver at the ready, rushed up and peered in. As Ginger knocked his gun arm high, I leapt forward from behind the door and gave him the same treatment as the first guard.

"It's a piece of cake," I said. "Tie him, Ginger-mine!" I rapped out as I heard more shouts. "I don't think we'll risk that gag again." I flung myself on the floor and peered round the jamb of the door. As Ginger and Peter worked on the two assailants, I waited, finger on the trigger. Three men, in modern western-style dress, one with a Sten, the other two with revolvers, came pounding up the stairs and into the corridor. I waited until they were nicely along, about half way up the corridor, and beautifully exposed, then I fired a quick burst above their heads. They dropped to the ground, yelling blue murder. I had deliberately avoided them and I think when the plaster snowed on to them, they realised it. Their hands were high in the air and neat bottoms was all I could see of them. They were quivering like hula champions.

Taking a chance that they understood, I rapped out: "Drop your guns!"

Obediently they did so. Ginger and Peter came hurrying out of our cell.

"Look! We may not have time to tie all these boys, but, they may be a useful shield. Let's take 'em."

"O.K.!"

Ginger grabbed the Sten and Peter the two revolvers. I gave the man nearest me a swift kick in the seat of his trousers and shouted : "Get up !"

He did so, reluctantly followed by the other two.

"Get going !" I ordered.

"Don't forget the cell door !" Peter reminded us.

"Good man !"

Ginger ran back, locked and bolted the door and joined us as we approached the stairway. Roughly I pushed one of the men forward so that, with hands raised, he appeared as the first target for any trigger-happy wog awaiting us. He yelled blue murder for fear he would be likened to a colander. There were surprised exclamations from the foot of the stairs. Clearly our ruse had worked.

"Come on !" I yelled, pushing the other two ahead of us. We all rounded the corner and were at the top of the stairs. At the bottom were our adversaries, three more of them, this time in djellababs and burnous and holding modern British rifles. They backed away as we came down the stairs, fairly fast, the Beretta pointed at them, the Sten at their captured colleagues and Peter Cuffley-Evans toting the two revolvers.

"This way, Chaps !" Ginger said, indicating that we should turn left when we reached the bottom of the stairs, the enemy moving back very swiftly now when they saw our armament, in the opposite direction.

We arranged ourselves with two of the crooks in front of us and one behind and forced them to move swiftly along the downstairs corridor, hands still raised. There was a smell of cooking emanating from a door ahead of us. I took no chances, I shoved one of the captives into the doorway, hands raised, to show we were masters of the situation and, for good measure, I let the pots and pans have a short sharp spray from the Beretta.

I found myself yelling in elation. It was a nice feeling.

Ginger grinned. "Hurry Skipper !" he yelled. I even let him get away with calling me skipper.

"I wish Garon and Dragarno would show up !" I shouted

to Peter as we hustled our captives along the corridor.

"Mind your eyes when we reach daylight," I warned Peter.

With our human shields ahead and behind we were out into a courtyard and were suddenly blinded by the fierce glare of the sun. For a moment we had to pause.

Ginger said, "The pause that refreshes!" as he fanned the courtyard with a burst from the Sten. When I opened my eyes, squinting to avoid the garish daylight, I saw several Arabs ducking for cover. In the courtyard stood one of the large limousines into which I had been thrown on the way from Chauen to captivity. No doubt Dragarno and Paul Garon had taken the other to go to Tangier to try out my plot against Tagore. There were also two small Fiats and a motor-cycle in the yard and I noted, with approval, that Peter instantly shot up the tyres with his two revolvers. We reached the big limousine and Peter, stuffing the revolvers into his waistband, got into the driver's seat and started it up, while Ginger and I, shielded by the three men, got into the back.

Peter revved-up and, leaving the three men standing, hands raised high in the middle of the courtyard, we pulled out of the yard, Sten and Beretta blazing as we zoomed off.

"Nice going, Ginger!" I congratulated him again.

"Straight down the hill and sharp right, Captain Evans!" Ginger said.

"Where were we held?"

"The outskirts of Tétuan. You'll see the city when we get round the bend in the road. Move, soldier!" He urged Peter. Peter merely smiled.

"This is a wonderful moment," he said, then, "did you know about this?" he asked me.

"Well, Ginger and I had cooked up a little scheme. . . ."

"That's why you stalled."

"One of the reasons," I agreed, "but don't think I wasn't trying to find a nice solution in the way of a juicy plot, in case he didn't appear," I admitted.

"How did you manage it?" Peter asked Ginger.

"Yes, now give us the facts, mister," I said, imitating an American Federal Dick. "All we want, mister, are the facts!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"IT WAS a very nice slice of Madcira," Ginger said. "A veritable push over!"

"Never mind the build-up, Big 'Ead!" I cut in, "give with the details, Buster!"

"Well, though I deliberately swam in the pool knowing that nothing would happen till Clare—" he stopped and apologised to Peter. "Sorry, Mrs. Evans! Till Mrs. Evans started for the melons, I romped through my lunch and wasn't far behind when she sauntered. Since there are nothing but shops in the Souk I reckoned they would take her—or you, Gar', if you worked the swop lark, by car to some hidden destination. The thing to do was to find the car."

"So?"

"So I took a gander at the terrain and I figured that there were only two possible roads out of the Souk, the front and the back, which meant that, since there were no cars in front of the Medina, it didn't take my tiny mind long to stop smartly to the back."

"And there was the car?"

"Yes. Two of 'em. Nice big limousines, shining and looking for the world as if they held sweet-tempered Unesco execs."

"I saw them," I said, "just before I got a neat blow at the back of the skull!"

"And what happened after you'd found the cars?" Peter enquired.

"Thanks to Garway, here, I had Horace with me," Ginger continued.

"Horace—Horace who?" Peter enquired.

"Sorry! Horace is the name of Tienton's revolver. A pal at all times and at a time like this, Horace . . ."

"Don't waffle!" I interrupted. "Get on with it, Catesby!"

Ginger grinned, glanced back to see if we were being tailed

and urged "A *leetle* more pressure on the old accelerator, Captain Evans, if you'd be so *kaind*!"

"So you'd spotted the cars . . .?"

"Yep. Two evil-faced drivers were in the cars and the engines were gunned. That proved it was going to be a swift getaway."

"Smart boy. You catch on fast!" I said, sarcastically.

"Funnily enough, that part of the Souk was empty."

"Yes. I think that these people know Dragarno and Garon and wanted no part of anything they were up to."

"Or had been warned off. Anyway, I'd kept in the shadows of the Souk and hadn't been spotted by the drivers, but I looked far too obvious *not* to be suspicious, so I nipped into a place where they sell clothes."

"Where, with Horace's help, you acquired this foul-smelling, third-hand burnous."

"Check!" said Ginger. "The man didn't want to sell one, so I—er—acquired his."

"And of course that ridiculous beard you wore driving Ming II from Ceuta to Tétuan!"

"Check again!" Ginger said, then turned to Peter, as Jehu-like he sped towards the main road to Tangier.

"Excuse our jargon," he said. "Just for the records, Ming II is an Aston, not a Chinese doxy," Ginger explained.

"But how did you follow us?"

"I worked my way in the shadows to the nearest point I could to the cars—"

"The nearest?" I interjected.

"Yes—the shortest distance to get to the cars."

"To get to the cars?" I repeated.

"Don't keep repeating what I say," Ginger requested so good-humouredly, that even Peter, with a firm grip on the steering wheel and going like hell, had to smile.

"So?"

"I figured that the interest would be on Clare—er—Mrs. Evans, or you if you'd made the grade as a substitute, and that whilst she or you were being escorted into the car, that was the time to make a dash for them."

"Well, you didn't shoot 'em all bang-dead, just like that."

"No. But if Horace had been a tommy gun, I might have bagged the lot!" Ginger said hypothetically.

"Yeah—and me, bang-dead, too, I expect!" I said succinctly.

"When I saw you, chum, I reckoned I had a better chance of tailing. I was sure they would be quite kid-gloves with you, and once you'd made a deal for Mrs. Evans to go free, they wouldn't suspect too much treachery."

"And?"

"Well, I made a dart for the back of the second limousine. I planned to lay on the luggage grid, but a miracle happened!"

"The boot was open."

"Exactly. I had anticipated being done to a turn in the hot sun on the luggage grid, like an outsize in waffles, and—"

"Talking of waffles, you're waffling again!" I told Ginger. "Gimme the facts, Buster," I reiterated, like America's Sergeant Friday, "I jest want the facts!"

"It was as bumpy as one of those old crates we used to fly in," Ginger said.

"Never mind the line-shoot!"

"And as hot as that Stalky Piece at the *Juany*."

"Who *was* she?" I asked, interestedly.

"Stop waffling!" Ginger said, turning the tables on me. "Stick to the facts!"

"O.K. you win!"

"Well, we went out of Chauen and up into the hills until we came to the large house you were in and it looked just like the villa of any rich bloke. But they were pretty smart, these laddies, flying from the flagpole was the Tricolour."

"What was the point?"

"Well, it looked like the residence of a well-to-do Frenchman, or even a minor French official. It gave it the stamp of authenticity," Ginger explained.

"So you holed up in the boot, awaiting a chance to do something."

"Exactly. I saw them pull you out blindfolded, and then

drag you into the house. There were a lot of chaps about, and they all seemed to have some sort of cutlery or equalisers with them. That place was a high-powered H.Q. of some kind."

"How long were we there?"

"About a day and a half."

"What did you do for food?"

"I daren't leave the place—in case they took you somewhere else, but they had a garden. I don't want to touch another coconut as long as I live!" Ginger said solemnly.

I chuckled.

"I decided it was dangerous to stay in the boot—the car might be driven off—without you. On the other hand, I daren't be far away."

"What did you do, lie under the car?"

"No, there was an outside lavatory. I sat in that most of the time."

"You must have been popular."

"Too true! Everytime someone came to use it—it was in use! I've never heard so much growling! Occasionally, so that they wouldn't suspect, when the coast was clear, I nipped out into the garden and lay in the undergrowth."

"You did jolly well," Peter said, naively. Ginger and I exchanged glances, that 'jolly well' nearly sent us up but we managed to refrain from laughing. The young Captain wouldn't have liked that.

"Then you saw Dragarno and Garon—?"

"Who?"

"The big boys, Dragarno and Garon they call themselves."

"Oh yes. Yes. There was a big to-do and out came two big shots, and they and some less important geezers piled into one of the big cars and made off fast."

"And seeing no signs of us, you knew we'd been left behind."

"Exactly. I had two things on my mind—"

"I know, Fern La Verne and the Stalky Piece!" I quipped.

"Very funny!" said Ginger. "One was to find you and get you out. The other was to be sure I could get that car away in an emergency."

"So?"

"So I'd made a few crafty recces when night fell and located the kitchen, among other things, also that one of the upstairs rooms had the shutters permanently closed—that was where I had figured you'd be."

"And we were!"

"I realised I must get to you before the Big Shots got back—that they were probably the brains and the chance of a sally-forth would be more auspicious without 'em."

"Too true!"

"So I waited until I could check the car dashboard. The ignition key wasn't there, so I waited until the driver was around, and whilst he was checking a tyre pressure, I clouted him with Horace's butt and dragged him —"

"Don't tell me, let me guess! Into the outside lav!"

"Check!"

"He looked right pretty sitting there, with a smile on his lips—"

"Dreamin' all the while of Plymouth Gin!"

"Out for the count—and how!" Ginger agreed, adding, "then, accompanied by Horace, I went stealthily along to the kitchen. There were two men cooking some ghastly local stuff—porridge or some terrible gash stuff and I —er—well—I persuaded them that I would do a better job taking up your food. The rest you know!" Ginger concluded.

"Bravissimo!" I said.

"Well done!" Peter added.

"Here's the main road, turn left for Tangier, and go, man, go!" I said.

It was good to be alive. Only the throbbing of my head and the aches in my body, and Captain Peter Cuffley-Evans driving with a finger missing from his right hand, made me realise that this Moroccan adventure was not a bad dream. Things were going on exactly as before, in the Fondouks the camels, ugly, or if you liked camels, dignified, aloof, disdainful, waited for the journey of their Nomadic masters to recommence. On the highway, their backs piled high with

merchandise, the little asses click-clacked along the macadam, tired, drooping ears, delicate fetlocks . . . I thought "They are held in low esteem but they carried Our Lord."

A faint ripple of arid air raised slightly an eloquent arm on the nearest palm tree. Did it mean a Sirocco—the dreaded three-day storm—when the air was a mass of sand, like some yellow London pea-souper? I hoped not. I hoped not in compassion for the many itinerants en route to Tangier, it was a wind as cruel as a Buchenwald gaoler. Ginger broke into my reverie :

"You haven't told me if you know where the two Big Shots were off to," he said.

"We do indeed. They were going to bump off Peter's boss—the area chief of Interpol. I fixed it," I added proudly.

"Eh?"

"Yes. Your friend was being most ingenious," Peter said.

"Well, call it the long memory," I added, and told Ginger my plot.

When I had finished he whistled, but he was not in the dark. He said :

"Wow! But supposing Tagore hadn't had false teeth?"

"Now don't be a clot. It was because I had observed he had that I devised it."

"There are times, Gar', when I think you're a genius."

"Only times?" I quipped back, and added, "I wonder if we can get back in time to nab the chap who is scheduled to grab Tagore's toothpaste? He might spill the beans about the gang's headquarters."

"That's a wonderful scheme," Peter agreed, but added in a crestfallen voice : "But there isn't any toothpaste to take!"

"That's true, too," I agreed, "but don't forget he's got to make the attempt. That is, someone's got to break into Tagore's bathroom! So tread on it, Peter!" I urged.

"I wish we were in ye D.B.," Ginger said to me.

"If wishes were horses . . ." I began, when Peter dashed our hopes again by saying :

"We'll need petrol soon, I'm afraid."

"Hell!"

"Oh, well . . . *C'est la vie* ! Perhaps a few seconds . . ."

"Perhaps a few seconds might be too late !"

We were silent for a time, Peter honking like mad whenever we approached any small cavalcade of merchants, en route for market day in the Grand Succo at Tangier.

"I bet Clare—er—Mrs. Evans will be thrilled to see you, Captain," Ginger said.

"And I bet you'll be thrilled to see her," Ginger added.

"Yes, yes indeed," Peter replied.

I thought, 'Me, too'. Then I remembered the strange conversation I had had with Peter when we had been incarcerated. The odd protective glimpse he had shown about the secretary, Ruth. I pondered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

IT WAS unlikely that we had been pursued, but we kept a watchful eye on the road back to Tétuan as we refilled in one of the new petrol stations the smart eyes-on-the-tourist Moroccans had installed on the excellent new road leading to and from Tangier. We were soon on our way again and I said to Captain Cuffley-Evans, "I've never heard how they copped you, Peter. Did they send Garon?"

"No. I knew Garon and also Dragarno," Peter replied. "No, they were cleverer than that. They must have slipped in one of their British laddies. He was English all right, down to the manservant and the sports car."

"No kidding!"

"They hadn't got him a D.B.4 but he was nicely set up, including a club-striped tie and a clipped moustache. They'd obviously genned him up and shipped him to Gib. Then they brought him on the ferry ahead of yours."

"I see! Then, when you met him, he offered to drive you to H.Q.," I surmised.

"Precisely," Peter agreed. "When I sat by the driver, chatting inconsequently about *Lilacs Are for Sweethearts*--that was one of yours?"

"*Lilacs Are for Lovers*," I corrected him, then I took up the story for him, "the Jeeves chap at the back clonked you --good and hard?"

"Exactly!"

"The rest we know," I added quickly, to save him any more embarrassment. I imagine he'd get a nice rocket when he reported--minus one finger--to Tagore and the terribly-correct Major Swinley, but Ginger wasn't so tactful.

"I suppose they gave you the Full Treatment to see how much you knew about their activities?" he said.

"Yes." There was a long pause. "They didn't get any

change. Not that I know anything worth knowing. I'm just a very small cog," Peter said.

"You probably wouldn't have been so tough if they had had Clare!" Ginger added.

"No. But they were correct about one thing—Mr. Tagore *really* knows, and if they had been able to kill him they would have been sitting pretty! I might have spilled what I did know, which was precious little, if they had touched Clare, but I think Garon was smart to take you as the substitute, if he could bump off Mr. Tagore," Peter imparted.

"Suppose this Dragarno—" Ginger began, but I thought the Captain had had enough of Ginger's quizzing on the raw. So I nudged Ginger and changed the subject.

"Since the Opposition knows—in quite a big way—that we're still in the business, there seems to me to be no harm in getting Ming II out of storage," I suggested. "If you'd detour so we can collect her, I'll follow you blokes into H.Q.," I suggested.

"O.K.," Ginger replied. "We've got quite a nice heap of rib ticklers if the enemy start any fun and games." He tapped the Beretta almost affectionately.

I had not, of course, been to the H.Q. of Peter's 'mob', for Tagore and Major Swinley had come down to the lobby of the *Opal* to meet me after Peter had been taken; they were some sort of sub-section, or special detachment of Interpol, and were housed away from the main body. It was a modern building, American in style, square and simple and, I suspected, could withstand any sudden shocks if by chance a few bombs were planted therein. Outside, in the Moroccan sunlight, the citizens and tourists passed by in exemplary fashion, few realising that within, a small, efficient and badly needed international organisation was battling crime all over the world—international fraud, robbery, phoney currency, illicit diamonds, arms smuggling, the landing of illegal immigrants, all these were combated by Interpol, but you scraped the barrel to reach the depths where the Dragarno mob squelched in their particular stinky job—they even scorned the 'small change' to be made from peddling opium and

Indian hemp. For them, the big money in drug-trafficking was made from cocaine and heroin, which commanded as much as two hundred pounds an ounce from drug-craving addicts. Dragarno and company were the ~~king~~ of the earth.

Captain Cuffley-Evans' Interpol pass—concealed in his sock and undetected by Dragarno's mob when he was in captivity—had whistled us—tommy guns and all—swiftly into the city. We were soon standing—I like some recalcitrant schoolboy—in front of Mr. Tagore and the grim-lipped Major Swinley.

We told them our story and, at the point when I explained about the twist of knowing Mr. Tagore had dentures, even the frosty Major allowed his sixth-carbon copy of a smile to appear.

There might not be much time to lose. Somewhere in Tangier, Dragarno and Garon were arranging for a henchman to enter Mr. Tagore's house and locate the toothpaste. It was here that Ginger had a brainwave.

"If this stinker's looking for a tube of toothpaste, then let's leave one in a prominent position for him."

This was agreed. Peter was given special leave to go and see Clare and, although I longed to join him, I did not think their reunion was the time or place for me to be present, instead, leaving Ginger to 'represent' me at the proposed ambush: "Your Stalky Piece can wait!" I said, to the astonishment of the others. Ginger merely grinned. "Give Fern my regards," was his reply. I drove the Aston up to Fern's flat.

There was no reply, and I concluded she was out to lunch with someone. I had to admit to myself that for a moment I felt resentful. It was absurd, but I was actually jealous. I tried to deride myself and laugh it off but, nevertheless, it was so. There I was, *soi-disant* sophisticate, gay boulevardier, a smarty-pants writer, if not of quality output then of quantity, man of the world and Gay Lothario, in a state because a hard-boiled Honky-tonk singer had proved to be as soft-boiled as a one minute egg, as sweet as a honeycomb, as warm

as a Tahitian sunset, and with a smile that spelled harmony. Oh yes, Miss Scutt, you had caught yourself one captive!

Since I was visiting, I also thought I would pop back to Tagore's H.Q. When I got there I asked if I could see Captain Cuffley-Evans (knowing quite well he was with his wife). When the security guard at the desk told me that he wasn't in, I said I'd like to see his secretary. I was then told that Captain Evans hadn't a secretary, there was a secretarial 'pool' and when Peter wanted to dictate he sent for one of the girls. I said it was Miss Ruth I wanted to see, and gave my name. The custodian at the desk eyed me with some suspicion, but I had only a short while ago been in the building with Captain Evans so I had some standing. He had a muffled word on the internal telephone with the girl Ruth.

"She'll come down and see you," he said, with reluctance.

I nodded and thanked him, strolled to the doorway and looked out into the street. Opposite, one of the street bankers was busy altering the prices on his blackboard. A small group of impoverished speculators were eagerly scanning the new prices, some of them lived by making a few pennies by rushing up and down the street selling or buying on the fluctuating market. A franc here, a peseta there . . . hazardous but possible.

A female voice with a slight accent that was probably Spanish asked: "You wanted to see me?"

I turned.

Standing behind me, with raven hair, big, wide, brown eyes and a wide mouth heavily made-up, with a lower lip that was pendulous and desirable, stood Ruth, high cheek-boned, gipsy-like, in a plain white blouse and a white, pleated skirt with a neat black moiré belt holding in the neatest waist in North Africa.

"Wow!" I exclaimed. "*C'est formi!*"

Like a lot of women, Ruth instantly froze on the outside, but behind the ice there was the pleasure of being admired.

"I'm so sorry!" I said, instantly apologising, "but you are rather glamorous to be a secretary."

"I don't know why secretaries can't be—attractive—with-

out comment," Ruth replied in perfect English, but with just that trace of an accent.

"Are you English? I detect a Spanish accent, and—"

"If it's any concern of yours, Mr. Trenton, was it—?"

"Yes. Garway Trenton, you could call me—"

"Mr. Trenton," Ruth cut in firmly. "I have an English mother and a Spanish father."

"Then I wasn't far wrong, Miss—Miss?"

"My name is Ruth dos Compos."

"*Enchanté* and all that," I replied, clicking my heels and taking her hand. I bent low and all but kissed it. This happened so infrequently with the British that the lovely Ruth thawed as quickly as an ice cream over a blow-torch.

"What did you want to see me about?" she enquired.

"It's my tobacco pouch. I think I left it upstairs, when we saw Mr. Tagore."

"Oh. All right. I'll go and find it for you."

"Thank you so much. I probably put it on Mr. Tagore's desk."

"What's it look like? I don't want to bring you Mr. Tagore's."

"No, no indeed. He's had enough trouble with me already," I confessed.

Ruth smiled.

"You're awfully young to be in a sagacious concern like this," cupid-like I arrowed her way. She smiled now, and her teeth were beautiful and very white and very even.

"I have a command of languages."

"You have a command of me, too," I said. She started to frost again. She said :

"You were going to describe your tobacco pouch."

"Oh yes, thanks. It's black leather with a Balliol crest on the side."

There was a flash of interest in her eyes. "Did you row for Balliol?" she asked me "Yes," I replied, adding, "you don't look the type who'd be interested in oarsmen!"

"We had a dinghy once, I was a member of the Atlanta Y.C.—that's why I knew about Balliol. I saw them win the

Head of the River in London then. Was it your crew?"

"After my time, alas!" I positively beamed at her—it brought her back to the present.

"I'll get your tobacco pouch," she said abruptly.

She turned and went back past the man at the desk who couldn't help watching the undulations. She was terribly female. She didn't fling it at you, like some of them, it just happened she had what it takes and you had to look at her. Head erect, her breasts jellied a little under the blouse as she walked, she had a natural grace.

I gave a low whistle, not for publication. I thought 'If I had known how many attractive women there were in Tangier, I'd have left Ming II at home and flown out!'

There was a short delay while Ruth dos Compos searched for my tobacco pouch. Presently she returned empty-handed.

"I'm sorry I can't find it," she reported.

"Oh, never mind. I could have left it in the car, I suppose. Anyway, thank you Senorita dos Compos. I do hope we'll meet again." She smiled.

"*Adios!*" she said. I waited and watched her go. It was a pleasant sight and, as I'd remarked earlier, I was essentially an Aristotle man, only slightly preferable to Bristols, of course, and I simply had to watch her walk away. She knew dam' well I thought she was *terrifico*, and she couldn't resist turning at the foot of the stairs, just to give me the full treatment prior to departure. I was certainly glad I wasn't ninety-eight.

I walked out into the sunlight and went to where two taxis were parked. After an altercation, because the front one didn't like it, I took the second. I told the driver to take me to the *Opal*.

Once inside the taxi, I took out my tobacco pouch and grinned, then filled my pipe.

Well I'd gandered Ruth and I could see why Captain Peter Cuffley-Evans had been worried about her. Senorita Ruth dos Compos was quite a dish. Then, too, so was, in a completely contrasting way, Clare Cuffley-Evans. Who said that even millionaires tire of partridge every day?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

AT TAGORE'S the trap was laid, security men were cleverly and carefully posted in the garden and in the house the difficulty was to ensure that the rat who had been assigned to the job would have enough confidence to be able to get sufficiently into the precincts so that the trap could be sprung. Mr. Tagore's villa was simply but richly furnished, the bathroom austere, and in it, chiefly to amuse Ginger, on a glass shelf over the wash basin lay a partly used tube of toothpaste. Ginger, much to the astonishment and perplexity of the Interpol men, had had great fun doing a lot of noisy T.V. commercials about the toothpaste, which was one of the better-known brands. After this, there seemed little to be done but to wait. War and detection seemed to have at least that in common—the patience to wait.

I brought out my dog-eared copy of John Crompton's *Life of the Spider*, and wondered if this particular fly would come buzzing into our carefully spun web. It seemed ironic to me that the 'joke' plan—the plan I had evolved merely to gain time—time for Peter Cuffley-Evans and me to be rescued by Ginger Bier—should now have the twist that it was to be used, but ironic in a boomerang way—to ensnare one of the traffickers in 'tea'—and I didn't mean the Earl Grey kind!

We could not, of course, be sure that the attempt to assassinate Tagore would be by night, but the chances seemed better; in between reading spells I found a certain amount of pleasure in suggesting to Ginger some of the things that might happen, the one he particularly enjoyed was that there might have been a Mrs. Tagore, or the unlikely but possible idea of this good and trusty man having an immorata who went into the bathroom, cleaned her teeth—and dropped dead! Ginger bet me that I wouldn't tell this to Tagore, knowing perfectly well that, in the old F.A.A. days,

we always took a 'dare'. Tagore enjoyed it even more than Ginger had.

It was about midnight, after what seemed the longest night in the year, that the miscreant was observed sliding stealthily over the wall. It was an eerie and exciting moment.

For a long time he crouched prone on the top of the wall, watching the silent house, in which all lights had been extinguished. It was as if he had fainted on the wall, but he was taking no chances and wanted to be absolutely sure that he could accomplish his villainous mission. He seemed almost chimeral, evanescent, as he seemed to float, wraith-like, through the garden to the square-cut villa. One somehow expected 'goofy', reed-like music, to accompany the intruder's appearance, his light-coloured burnous positively glaring, ghost-like in the moonlight. The security boys remained rooted to their hide-outs, as still as statues, only the force outside, concealed in parked cars, stepped swiftly out, Stens at the ready, and moved up to the wall.

Dragarno's man had been well drilled in the layout of the villa. He instantly chose a drainpipe nearest to the bathroom and skilfully, simian-like, shinned up it to a balcony on the correct floor and only one window from the bathroom. To save the intruder too much effort, we had obligingly left the bathroom window shutters wide open and the window an inch or two.

The swing across from the balcony to the bathroom window-ledge was easy for an athletic character and this man was certainly that, though I expected his burnous to catch on the shutters, but he swiftly draped it closer and secured it with a belt before he took the leap. As soon as he was in the bathroom, the Interpol lads arose from their concealments in the garden and moved resolutely towards the villa. Up in the house, in the corridor to the bathroom, Tagore, Major Swinley and a tough Sergeant, who used to play forward for the London Scottish stood ready with a Tommy-gun; with him, safety catch off, finger on the trigger of Horace, was Ginger . . . meantime, the fly had reached the web.

The intruder dropped to the bathroom floor, inched to-

wards the coveted toothpaste with hand outstretched.

Then, with a cry of "Tallyho! Bandits!" Ginger and company rushed forward, flicking on the bathroom light. The man had been well versed in what to do if he were caught. He knew he couldn't hope to reach the window; time was precious, every particle of a second was needed. He didn't even turn to make a dash for it. He rammed the capsule containing the nicotine solution into his mouth.

The dead man lay huddled beneath his burnous. Major Swinley turned him over. He was a European.

"Well, we won't get much out of him!" Swinley said. "Still, it was worth a try. He was probably the man that Captain Cuffley-Evans met. He turned to me, 'your substitute!'"

I nodded.

"Well, it certainly worked—the toothpaste idea," I said facetiously. No one bothered to answer.

"They may send someone else to see what happened to him," Tagore remarked. "But I doubt it." For a moment he looked down at the dead man, and then said with compassion: "Poor misguided fool. He was expendable!" He turned to me. "We have to thank you, Mr. Trenton, for getting our Captain Cuffley-Evans out in one piece."

"Two pieces," I corrected him, "if you take into consideration his finger!"

Tagore nodded and repeated gravely, "Two pieces."

"What are your plans for departure?" Major Swinley said, getting back to normal. I grinned.

"Haven't I earned the place Otto von Schneider booked for me?"

"Meaning?"

"Can't I stop a few days—I might still be useful. I've got the gem of an idea. Besides, the brochures say that this is quite a place, pig stickin' and polo and so on," I said, jokingly.

"The trouble is we can't catch the pigs fast enough to stick them!" Mr. Tagore said.

"I can arrange a chukka or two for you, I expect," the

Major said, and he wasn't joking. "What's your handicap?"

"Three."

The Major was—for the Major—quite impressed.

"Next Saturday, then," he said.

It was his way of saying I could stay on. I winked at Ginger.

"Come, Catesby, to our nefarious schemes." I turned back to the Major. "No shadow, I beg you, Major. We're big boys now."

He looked enquiringly at Mr. Tagore who nodded.

"O.K., Trenton. But report every twelve hours, 'phone in, if it's easier. Here's our number."

I took it and thanked him.

The last bat was scurrying off to sleep as Ginger and I left Mr. Tagore's villa.

"Too bad about that geezer on the deck," Ginger remarked. "Probably left a widow and kids."

"Yes. He found out too late that crune does not pay! I wouldn't mind catching up with Paul Garon again," I said, musingly.

"You didn't go much for that one. did you, Gar'?"

"Even if we were cremated together I wouldn't warm up to him," I said. "Come on, let's take breakfast with Fern that's if she's gone to bed yet!"

"In the words of Sam Goldwyn—if he ever said it, and if so I suspect it was a publicity stunt—will you 'include me out', I'd as lief see the Stalky Piece. I feel Fern would rather see you alone."

"Why do you say that?"

"Just the look in the gal's eye."

"Oh phooey!"

"Just because you are the writer, there is no need to think you're the only observant character in Tangier," Ginger said.

"Lunch at the *Opal* then—one o'clock?"

"Sure enough."

"And keep the old equaliser in a handy spot. There is probably a kopek or two on your swede, too!" I cautioned.

"O.K. sport! Ding Ho!"

We parted and I had a hunch that Fern would still be at the *Juany*. Tangier was that sort of town.

It seemed to me that the manager of the *Juany* could have given me a more enthusiastic welcome, but it is no good going through life with a permanent log on one's shoulder, so I let it pass. Despite the fact that it was fast approaching dawn, there were still quite a few customers in the *Juany* and the orchestra were enjoying their own version of *Muscat Ramble*. One or two characters had even had the urge to stooge round the dance floor, but Fern was not among them. I nodded, like some hard-bitten habitué, to the band boys and went to look for Fern in her dressing room.

I tapped, waited for a reply and, upon her "Come" I entered. She was seated at her mirror and was staring at her reflection, breathing stentoriously.

"Hi, stranger!" I said, facetiously. I was very, very glad to see her. She hardly turned. Her lips formed the word 'Hi' but no sound was emitted from her mouth.

"Fern!"

I hurriedly crossed to her.

"What's happened . . . what?"

I pulled her round to me. "Fern! Fern!"

She looked at me as if she were having difficulty in placing me—me who had known her so happily and intimately a few days earlier. Was this the girl I had quoted the Song of Solomon to?—was this my lover?

"Fern!" I kept repeating her name idiotically and I started to shake her. Had she been drinking? She essayed an attempt to talk, but it ended in a confused, incoherent jumble of words. It was then that I noticed her eyes, they were enormous, and the pupils were dilated to an alarming degree.

A great fear clutched at my heart.

One of her arms was resting on the little make-up table, her hand, sprawled, lay on a stick of Leichner, one finger in the powder bowl. the other clutching what appeared to be a large safety-pin. My eyes travelled up her arm till they found the tell-tale mark I dreaded to find . . . the punched

skin that proved *that Fern had been taking drugs.*

"My God! Darling. Not you!"

From behind the mental wall that separated us, she seemed to know that what she had done was wrong.

"Who gave you this?" I shouted. "Come on. Tell me! Tell me!" I took her by the shoulders and shook her wildly. Her hair fell over her face. "Come on Fern. Talk, dam' you, talk!" I hit her harshly across the face. For a brief moment it seemed to spark a flash of lucidity into her mind.

"José. It was José. It is always José —he, he gets it for me," she said, adding pathetically: "Don't be angry with me, darling."

"José who? What José?"

"José Anchura," she said. I let her go and she fell back on the cheap cane chair, and her head dropped on her chest like a marionette whose strings had been freed. She was cold.

I stood looking down at her, but though I should have been sympathetic I was thinking, thinking . . . the germ of the idea that I had told Mr. Tagore I had in the back of my mind now burst forward, hammering at my temples . . . I thought, 'I believe I've got it!'

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I HAD looked into the *Opal* again and, when I arrived there, the sun was up and the Levante wind beginning to whip up the sand on the long stretch of stoneless beach, a forewarning of the approach of the sirocco I had noticed the day before.

I told the clerk to wake me at eight sharp. I had just time for a short sleep; in fact, it seemed that my head had hardly touched the pillow when the telephone rang :

"Eight o'clock, sir !" said a voice. I mumbled a 'thank you' and muttered a curse under my breath. 'The secret about getting up is to get up at once; he who hesitates is—back asleep again ! I got up and ran a bath. I had learned some 'gen' I was anxious to test out, and I considered the facts as I shaved and hurried out of the hotel by eight-thirty.

I went up to Cuffley-Evans' place. I rang the bell and the faithful Hassan appeared. He seemed pleased to see me. For me, in Morocco that made a change.

"Good morning, Hassan," I said.

"Good morning, suh !" he replied, bowing to me and in no whit surprised at this early matutinal call.

"How's cousin Mustafa?" I asked jocularly, giving him a large wink. Mustafa was his cousin, the man who worked for the laundry company; he who had 'spirited' Clare to and from the *Opal* when she pleaded with me to save Peter.

"Too early for breakfast?" I enquired genially of Hassan. I was good-tempered in the mornings but not the boisterous slap-on-on-the-back type, like my daily, Mrs. Lily Mertens, who was far too hearty.

Hassan misunderstood me. He didn't realise that I was inviting myself.

"Yes. Missus eating now," he said, salaaming me in. I smiled to myself. Fact number one coming up fast.

Hassan announced me, and I could tell when I went in that Clare was pleased, but also disconcerted. "Gar', how

marvellous!" she said. I let it pass. I kissed her chastely on the cheek. I felt she wanted to clutch me tightly.

"So we made it!" I said. "Can I take some breakker off you? I'm famished."

"Of course." She let me go and turned to the amiable Hassan to order my food, then she said: "How wonderful—your escape, I mean. Peter told me all about it."

"Good!" Then, far too casually I felt to deceive her, I enquired: "Where is your lord and master? Still crashing the old swede?"

"Eh?" Didn't she savvy Naval slang or was she stalling?

"Peter. Is he kipping?"

"No. No. He had to be at the office early today. You'll catch him there—have your breakfast first."

Had he gone out impransus? I doubted it. I didn't want to embarrass her by saying I'd ring him. I merely nodded and sat down. I didn't say a word, either, when Hassan came and laid a second place.

We chatted brightly, re living and laughing about the episode at Chauen, and I filled in for her some of the details of the escape Peter had omitted. When she poured my coffee I noticed the locket on the bracelet and I said:

"Still wearing your locket."

"I always wear it," she replied, adding, "haven't we had this conversation before?"

"I did ask you once who was in it."

"I could only have made one reply, 'my husband, of course!'" Clare retorted.

"There isn't room for me in it, is there?" I quipped, "perhaps a snippet or two from my raven locks if you couldn't bear my passport photo?"

She laughed, but didn't want to get entangled. I wasn't sure if I had played this round correctly.

"I pass!" I said. She was mystified, or pretended to be.

It was a typical English-type breakfast and I 'did' Clare's cook 'proud'. We chatted inconsequentially about local matters, finally about the next holiday in England, and, whereas most Britishers who work abroad talk enthusiastic-

ally about their leave, Clare was an exception. This round I was sure I had won. I needed another trick to take the hand. I said: "Well, Mam, I must away—parting is such sweet sorrow, and all that. Don't forget me when you need a man to sleep in your bath, I'm the right size."

Clare smiled.

"Our bath isn't the same as the one at the *Opal*."

"Touché and all that!" I bowed mockingly.

"There'll be a sirocco before dusk today," she said as she saw me to the door.

"That wouldn't be the only dust-up in Tangier!" I joked. Clare pretended to wince.

"Must you?" she said.

"Can I help having a sense of humour?" I replied.

"Sense of humour?"

"Well, maybe it was a bit corny."

"A bit?"

"O.K., a lot corny. Good-bye, Clare." We stood on the doorstep looking at one another for a few seconds.

"You know, Clare," I said gravely, "I wish you liked me a little more."

"Now, Garway Trenton, don't shoot that sort of line with me," she said in her low, magical voice, "you know very well at home you've got oodles of girls—"

"'Oodles', is that one of the Roedcan slang words?" I interrupted her, but she parried on:

"The Debs' Delight, aren't you?"

"Of course, but this is Tangier, not Mayfair," I said, falling into her trap.

"There's always Fern La Verne!" she said, far too sweetly, and closed the door in my face. I made a self-pitying grimace and crossed to the nearest bacall and I didn't unfortunately, mean Lauren. I went to the telephone. I took out the piece of paper on which Major Swinley had written his office number and I rang it. When I got through, I asked for Miss Dos Compos then, to the surprise of the bacall proprietor, I placed my handkerchief over the mouth of the 'phone, and when Ruth came on the line I adopted a slight accent. I said:

"Hallo, Ruth! This is José!"

I could hear her gasp incredulously at the other end.

"José! You must be mad to ring me here—" she inadvertently blurted out, then checked herself. She lowered her voice and began to talk swiftly in Portuguese. I hung up on her, smiling triumphantly. Mentally I pulled the playing cards towards me. Yes! I'd won that trick all right! My fancies were proving facts. My hunches were paying off. And, just to mix my metaphors really thoroughly, the pieces in my jig-saw puzzle were plopping nicely into place.

I made for Mr. Tagore's offices.

The security man on the door nodded a recognition as I walked into the entrance hall to Mr. Tagore's offices.

"Miss dos Compos?" he asked me as he lifted the house 'phone in anticipation of my assent.

"No. Mr. Tagore or Major Swinley." I requested.

He dialled a number and I could hear the Major's "Swinley, here!" Curt and no-nonsense Swinley! It seemed odd to think that behind that granite façade lurked a man who loved and wanted to be loved!

The doorman received the official O.K. for me to go up and I waited for an escort as I couldn't be sure which floor. In a moment or two, the sergeant who had been on the capture at Tagore's villa came down in the lift to take me up. He nodded affably.

"Get some sleep, sir?" he enquired.

"Enough, thanks. Is Captain Cuffley-Evans in?"

"I'll find out, sir."

"Thanks!"

Major Swinley sat behind a practical but by no means ornate desk and, save for the small electric fan on it, and the sun and the palm trees outside the window, it could have been Whitehall. The fan was not working, for the palm trees were being lashed by the ever-increasing velocity of the wind and there was sand in the air, even though the offices were up the hill and well away from the beach.

"Yes?" Major Swinley waited for my news.

"I think I'm on to something pretty hot," I said, trying to control the excitement in my voice but feeling like an ace reporter with a story that had scooped all Fleet Street.

"Yes?" The Major's tone was guarded; it was as if he always schooled himself not to become emotional when most men might.

"It's top level stuff," I averred.

"You mean you want to take it to Mr. Tagore?"

"Yes. And I'd like Captain Cuffley-Evans to be present—though he's not going to like it," I added.

"Check." The Major flipped down an inter-com gadget and talked to Tagore and Peter. Then, when he finished his conversation, I requested: "Also Miss Ruth dos Compos!"

The Major's eyebrows were enquiringly raised very slightly.

"Miss dos Compos?" he repeated.

"Yes, please, Major," I replied crisply.

He considered this for a moment.

"Yes, I know," I said, cutting in on his thoughts, "all personnel have been strictly vetted." I didn't add but I thought, 'not always completely satisfactorily, however.'

As we went through his outer office he told an austere-looking secretary to send Miss dos Compos to Mr. Tagore's office.

Tagore looked tired. He wasn't as young as us others and the strain of the previous night and lack of sleep was telling on him, but he smiled warmly and I could not help expressing this new mood by saying:

"I never expected to be received so cheerfully in this office, Mr. Tagore. Time heals all breaches," I added. He didn't answer, but he grinned and offered me a cigar.

"Thank you. I'll have this later as my prize if my hunch is a good one."

"What is this hunch?"

"May we wait for Captain Cuffley-Evans and Miss dos Compos?" I requested.

He nodded. Major Swinley was looking out of the closed window. "Sirocco," he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

PETER CAME in first.

"Hullo!" I greeted him, believing in the surprise attack. "I didn't see you for breakfast at your house today."

The colour drained from his face. "What do you mean?"

"Only that I had breakfast with your charming wife."

Peter quickly pulled himself together and said: "Good show. Sorry I had to leave early."

I had made my point, so I let this go. Instead, I said: "Peter, I'm very sorry for what I'm going to do."

"Going to do?" He was genuinely puzzled, and very much on the defensive. He looked at the other two enquiringly. The Major answered his unspoken query.

"Mr. Trenton has a theory—or something," Swinley explained.

"A hunch, Major. That's all. Just a hunch."

At that moment the beautiful Ruth dos Compos entered.

"You sent for me?"

She was certainly very lovely; so, too, they said was the Borgias, Circe and the Lorelei.

Again I decided on a surprise attack. I said: "Miss dos Compos why do you travel on a Spanish passport when you are not Spanish?"

It took her completely off guard. She yammered for a few seconds. "I haven't—I mean—I don't—what are you talking about?"

I feigned indifference. "Oh, I don't suppose it's a crime, but it's probably news to your bosses, I—"

"What are you trying to do, Trenton?" Peter demanded belligerently. I ignored him and quickly changed the subject. I said, challengingly.

"Miss dos Compos, you knew that I was coming here and you knew that Captain Cuffley-Evans was going to meet me, didn't you?"

"Mr. Trenton," Ruth replied icily, "I have no access to any worthwhile information here."

"Maybe not. But you knew that Captain Evans was going to meet me *because he told you!*"

Ruth shot Peter a quick look for guidance. He had gasped and stepped forward menacingly.

"Now look here, Trenton, my private life has absolutely nothing at all to do with you!"

"I wish I could agree, Peter, and, as I said a moment ago, I'm sorry about this, but later I think you'll thank me."

"I very much doubt it!"

"O.K. Only two more questions—are you in love with Ruth dos Compos?"

"How dare you!"

"I dare all right, but if you object so heartily I'll put it another way." I swung round to Ruth and this time what I had in mind was pure supposition but, because of the events, I had every reason to believe I was correct.

"Miss dos Compos, you have been having an affaire with Captain Cuffley-Evans—" I got no further. Major Swinley who had been looking so extremely concerned at my obvious 'bad taste', conduct certainly unbecoming to an O.E. and Balliol man, simply had to protest!

"Look here, Trenton, is all this absolutely necessary?"

"I think so, Major," I said warmly. "You see, it was because Captain Evans wouldn't leave his wife—he didn't mind an affaire with Miss Compos—that Miss Compos in a fit of pique, gave away the information about my arrival which enabled Dragarno's narcotic mob to snatch him!"

"Are you crazy? You must be mad!" Ruth shouted shrilly.

"Methinks Miss dos Compos does protest too much," I retorted, then fired my really big guns. A great volley of a salvo: "And why, you may ask, is Miss Ruth dos Compos able to supply information to the Dragarno mob? Why has Dragarno this fifth column in the delightful shape of Miss dos Compos in your midst? Simply because, though her papers were well-nigh perfect, she is indeed Portuguese."

"Look," the Major said. "What proof have you that—?"

“Just one minute, Major!” I requested, “then the floor is all yours. And, of course, her brother, too, is Portuguese.”

“Why do you harp on this business of being Portuguese. Trenton?” Mr. Tagore said gently.

“Because Paul Garon is Portuguese and not Spanish.”

“And?”

“And Ruth’s real name is Anchura. Isn’t it, Ruth?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Ruth said.

“Look here, Trenton!” Peter came rushing at me, but I side-stepped as he swung at me.

“Now! Now! Temper! Temper!” I chided.

“Get to the point, Trenton!” Mr. Tagore requested.

“If there is one!” Peter shouted.

“Oh, there is one all right. You see Paul Garon’s name is Anchura, too. *Ruth is Paul Garon’s sister!*”

She stood stock-still, white-faced and, now, unemotional. Peter stared at her, seeking a rebuttal. It did not come.

“How can you prove all this?” Tagore said.

“A series of clues. . . . In the first place, Garon, who claimed to be Spanish, spoke fluent Portuguese. That isn’t difficult—for a Spaniard, but though I can’t speak either language well, I can tell the difference.”

“Go on.”

“Clue number two. Garon is not only a dope-pedlar, he is a dope-taker. A big ‘tea’ boy, brother Paul, isn’t he?”

Ruth gazed glassy-eyed at me.

“Point number three. In a conversation with me *which Ruth didn’t know about*, Paul, being a boastful character, told me that he had been at school in London and he mentioned the school and the district.”

“So?”

“Clue number four. The abduction of Captain Evans was an inside job, it had to be. Someone in the know must have had access to the news of my arrival and that Peter was going down to the docks to meet me.” I turned to Peter and said, as compassionately as I could, “It wasn’t a serious information leak, after all, Captain Cuffley-Evans had no reason to suspect that Ruth was a spy for Dragarno or that she would

be so vindictive, or shall I say feminine, as to ship him down the river in such a perfect double-cross. You see, Ruth wanted marriage, didn't you Ruth? Didn't she, Peter?" I challenged, but neither of them answered. I added; "Who said 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned'?"

"Go on with your deductions, Trenton," Mr Tagore said
"Clue number four is it?"

"Five" Major Swinley grimly corrected me.

"Thank you, Major! Clue number five When I devised the way in which to eliminate Mr Tagore with the nicotine solution Peter, who didn't seem so wildly enthusiastic about being reunited to his wife as, say, I personally would have been, was, however, tremendously concerned that no harm should happen to someone called Ruth!"

"Go on"

"I went to take a look at this hallowed possession, and when I saw her could readily understand that she aroused amorous feelings in Peter, here"

Peter still remained silent White, tense strained

"Whilst chatting to this charmer we talked about the river, that is, I pretended I'd left my tobacco pouch upstairs On the pouch is a Balliol crest I rowed for Balliol From Balliol we often send crews for Thames rowing This was a stroke of luck, Miss dos Compos mentioned a yachting club which has its headquarters at Hammersmith *where Paul Garon was at school!*"

"But," Major Swinley said, "how did you know that Paul Garon was José Anchura?"

"A good point Major and that is clue number six It's sad in a way because a friend of mine is involved"

For the first time at the interview Major Swinley looked startled "Mrs Cuffley-Evans?" he hazarded

"No, Major Swinley, not Clare Evans but a cabaret girl called Fern la Verne You remember, we once met in her dressing room"

The Major nodded "I was there because we suspected she took dope I hoped for a lead I felt she might take us to the narcotic boys"

"Your surmise was a good one, Major. Alas, it is true that Fern La Verne takes 'snow'. I wish I didn't have to admit it. I caught her when she had just entered those Elysian but horrific fields. Just before she went to bye-byes, I learned the name of the supplier. I think, perhaps, he was a boy friend, and this hurts me a great deal, gentlemen, because, and I abjectly confess it, I thought I was her first lover. His name was José Anchura!" I said dramatically.

"But how do you know that Garon is Anchura?"

"This was my high spot. Here my author's mind came into play. I played my hunch. I telephoned Ruth here and I pretended to be Paul Garon. I said 'This is José'. That was enough, Ruth fell right into the net, didn't you, ducky? She asked Paul why he was mad enough to call her here, and she dropped into fluent Portuguese. My case rests, gentlemen," I said, feeling like a D.A.

All the men, Tagore, Swinley and Peter, turned to Ruth. She slumped heavily into a chair.

"So what?" she said contemptuously.

Peter groaned and Tagore gave a sharp intake of breath.

"Well, well!" he said unemotionally. He turned to Swinley. "Our security arrangements want an overhaul, Major," he said.

The Major merely nodded. Then I played my trump card.

"Of course all this *was* supposition," I imparted to Ruth, "all this is circumstantial, but I will tell you one thing more. . . ." I paused for a dramatic effect and, unseen by Ruth, I winked at Mr. Tagore. "You see, our brother Paul Garon actually told me who you were when I was captured. He planned to kill me, so it didn't matter that I knew. He didn't anticipate that my chum Ginger Bier would rescue me."

Ruth looked up at me slowly. "José—?"

"Yes. José told me. José, in fact, double-crossed his own sister," I said bluffingly, "because" I lied, "he said that if ever he was taken he would bargain his life against yours!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that he would have betrayed that you were at H.Q. here—to save his own neck!"

CHAPTER THIRTY

I **CROSSED** to Peter and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Sorry, Pete," I said, "it just had to be told. . . ."

He stood staring unbelievably at Ruth dos Compos—or rather Ruth Anchura, and then he raised his hand and looked at the missing finger. He looked at it for a long time, then he looked up at Ruth almost uncomprehendingly. The silence was painful. Ruth just sat there, beautiful, indifferent to Peter, but hate on her face for her brother; it was as if she were 'wearing her very sins as stars'.

Mr. Tagore looked at me and nodded gratefully. Now was the time to strike. He said: "We know, Miss Anchura, that there is a consignment of heroin coming from Marseilles, probably by way of the Balearics—it must be due here soon—where? Where do the Dragarno gang land it?"

"There is a beach near Rio Martin, between Cap Negro and Ceuta. The dope is landed there."

Mr. Tagore could not resist a slight sigh of pleasure as Ruth sold her mob down the river. The Major followed it up. He said curtly:

"Yes, but *when*!"

"The night of the first big sirocco. They always come ashore in a sirocco, there is less chance of being detected."

"You mean they wait until the weather is bad?"

"Yes. They wait until the sirocco blows, then they send out a motor boat. It is hazardous, but it is safer that way," she said matter-of-factly, without expression. "They will land it tonight."

Major Swinley nodded. He turned to me.

"Thanks Trenton! This is invaluable information."

"We must act fast," Mr. Tagore said. He, too, turned to me. "We're very grateful."

"Then you won't mind demonstrating your gratitude?" I said quickly. Instantly Mr. Tagore was on his guard.

"In what way?"

"I'd like, that is, Ginger and I would like to come along."

Mr. Tagore looked at the Major. The Major frowned disapprovingly.

"Highly irregular," he said. He pressed a buzzer on his desk. I knew that Ginger and I could tag along.

The paratrooper sergeant I had met earlier entered. "Sir?"

"Miss dos Compos is under arrest," Major Swinley said, "take her away and lock her up."

The sergeant looked a trifle startled, but saluted and crossed to Ruth.

"Calmly, Ruth got to her feet. She looked at me venomously.

"Clever dick!" she ejaculated, then gabbled something in Portuguese which was clearly highly uncomplimentary. She passed Peter, and for a moment I thought he was going to strike her. It was as if she deliberately paused near him to see if he would. Instead, she suddenly turned and spat full in his face. The Sergeant, angered at this, grabbed her by the arm and jerked her out of the room. Slowly Peter cleaned his face with his sleeve. Mr. Tagore spoke without emotion.

"I think you had better remain here until we return, Captain Evans."

One couldn't be sure if Peter had heard. Then Major Swinley suddenly barked at him:

"Captain Cuffley-Evans, return to your room and wait there for further orders!"

His regular army training to obey orders held Peter in good stead. Still dazed, he nevertheless marched out of the room.

"Oh, Trenton, since we last saw you," Mr. Tagore said, "a report came in to us that one of the two garden supply shops had reported the sale of a supply of nicotine solution."

"Smart cookies these Dragarno boys." I said.

Mr. Tagore nodded, then said calmly: "For your information, I've ordered another set of dentures. If you were observant enough to notice my teeth weren't my own so speedily, it is obvious that I need another set."

"That's the trouble with the National Health, it's the same with their spectacles," I said, "they don't fit everyone."

After the previous tension, Mr. Tagore enjoyed this and, to our surprise, the Major emitted a Bashan-like bellow.

"I say, Trenton, I rather like that!" he said.

"Well! Well! Success!" I said.

"And now to business!" said Mr. Tagore. He spoke almost gleefully.

Once more Ginger and I were riding in Ming II back to Tétuan, but this time there was a difference, the wicked sirocco screamed its disapproval, sand swirled fiercely around the car, thick, yellow, choking sand. Wherever possible the travellers had taken refuge in the fondouks. By the roadside, the less fortunate had covered the beasts' heads with their burnouses and buried their own heads in the flanks of their faithful animals. All work had ceased on the wells, operated by walking the donkeys round in a circle to raise the precious water. Thick sand engulfed the Soufs, the deep impressions in the dunes. Sand was King--thanks to tempestuous winds; and the sun ironically shone fiercely down, saturninely grinning.

To reach the Rio Martin we had to go into Tétuan and then out again by the Ceuta road. We were in convoy with three other cars and, because the Major said I was accelerator-crazy, I had to 'bring up the rear.' The other cars carried Mr. Tagore, Major Swinley and a tough assortment of Interpol boys nicely decked out with the necessary cutlery. Captain Peter Cuffley-Evans was not on the 'party'. I asked Ginger what he thought they would do with him, "take his stripes away?"

"Bowler hat him, most likely!" was Ginger's uncompromising reply. "I don't think you're allowed to love if you're a member of Interpol!" Ginger added.

This made me smile.

"What's so funny, Catesby?" Ginger enquired.

"I dunno. It just amused me. Sort of a cue for a song, or something. Isn't this wind 'moider'?"

“‘Moider’? it’s *woise* than that,” Ginger said. “This’ll really whip up the sea. They’re brave men if they bring the ‘tea’ ashore in this lot.”

“And clever,” I asserted, “this isn’t the weather in which one keeps the best watch.”

“Too true,” Ginger added, then said, “I bet you’re anxious to re-present your visiting card to chum Garon!”

“And how I am! If only for ruining Fern La Verne’s life,” I replied, gritting my teeth as I drove. “That wicked basket!”

Ginger hesitated, knowing how I felt, then chanced: “Once an addict is she—is she incurable, Gar’?” he asked.

“I think that depends on how long she has been taking the snow,” I replied. “It could be she could be sent to a home.” I didn’t tell Ginger, but I had already talked to the Major about this and said I’d gladly finance it. I wondered, now that we had discovered that she was a junkie, if she had been ‘hopped up’ the night we had made love on the beach near Spartel. That silver-sweet night, peppered with stars, an indulgent moon and the heady fragrance of pine trees with the sussurous sighing sound of the breeze in the branches, the incessant flip-flop of the waves, lulling, pleasant . . . and Fern. Fern and her unhappy youth, Fern in honky-tonks and trying to make the grade in Hollywood, Fern and her introductory music *Got to Sing a Torch Song*. Had it been the dope that had given her the magical quality I had admired? I wanted to ask Ginger, who had first known her, this —and much more!

“Penny for them!” Ginger said.

“I was thinking of Clare Cuffy-Evans,” I lied. It didn’t fool Ginger but he played up to this.

“That is one Living Doll!” he remarked with enthusiasm. “You think she knew all about Peter and the Ruth dos Compos affaire?”

“Very definitely.”

“That’s heap bad medicine!”

“Yes.” I didn’t say that I had seen Clare with Major Swinley going into the *El Minzah*, the first time I had crept back into Tangier. Nor the Major’s reactions on the occasions

that Clare's name had been mentioned. I had a pretty good idea whose image was in that locket dangling from Clare's wrist. If Clare had been a Sioux the scalps round her belt would have been too weighty for her to carry. Man was ever eclectic; though I was terribly cut up about Fern, I knew, too, my own scalp mentally dangled there with the others.

With all the power I had at my disposal in Ming II it was natural I should feel that the drive to Tétuan was interminable; Major Swinley, ahead of me in the convoy in his Thunderbird, must have felt the same. But eventually we rumbled into the Plaza Espana, normally crowded but now, at one in the morning, strangely deserted save for a member of the Mehala, the white uniformed guard on sentry-duty outside the Caliph's Palace, carrying a tall lance. He stood, disdainful, proud, in his sentry box, made miserable by the howling wind that cut fiercely through his uniform, but the sirocco was the Will of Allah and, so be it, one must accept these things philosophically.

We paused briefly in the square while Mr. Tagore and Major Swinley paid a swift call at the Alto Comissario, who had already been 'put in the picture', and made special arrangements in collaboration with Tagore's party.

As we waited, I observed to Ginger that I hoped that the Dragarno mob's spies weren't around . . . a quick signal to the motor torpedo boat to turn back and that would be 'our lot' for the night, we would have 'had it.'

"That's the trouble with convoys, 'skip'," Ginger said, making me wince at the word 'Skip'. "There's nothing like a little intimate party for hotting things up. I reckon you and I in Ming II with a Sten apiece could have rolled this thing up in no time."

"Big Head!"

"Could be, Catesby, but for one thing we'd have been to Rio Martin, done the job and be on our way back by now with the Aston and no telegraphing our arrival ahead as we are doing with this convoy."

"Them's my seddimans, too, Bier old boy, but wot the 'ell?"

I suppose we're lucky to be on the party at all, at all."

Now Tagore and the Major had returned and we were soon on the road again, making the almost right-angle turn up the coast for Ceuta.

The sirocco, by no means spent out, screamed through the palm trees and bent the upper branches of the peppers and eucalyptus trees as they soughed in protest. Occasionally the moon appeared briefly to platinum the wind-ridden land, then retired to sulk behind voluminous, thunderous-black clouds. I didn't envy the M.T.B. that was going out to collect the heroin, nor would I like the job of transferring the precious cargo, small though it would be, and the return journey through the breakers to the beach wouldn't be a piece of cake.

In addition to the forces mustered by the local authorities and the Interpol boys from Tangier, Gibraltar and Melilla had been alerted. There had been the promise of a corvette from Gib and Melilla were sending gunboats, but this port was too far off to be of immediate use, their use lay in the possibility of interception if the main vessel escaped back towards the Balearics.

As we approached the landing beach, past the beach at Rio Martin and before Cap Negro was reached, the convoy peeled-off the excellent main road linking Ceuta with Tétuan, and we jogged down a rough dirt road towards the proposed landing beach.

The dusty road and the sand whipped up by the sirocco presented a scene similar to war conditions in the desert. It was a choking, all-powerful, nigh-impenetrable 'smoke' screen and it impeded our progress so considerably I was afraid that we would reach the rendezvous *after* the heroin had been safely landed and the bandits secure miles away, perhaps in Ceuta, guzzling Spanish tequila and laughing like hell at our cack-handed cavortings.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

ANY MEMBERS of any armed forces (if they have ever seen action) will tell you that it isn't the battle it is the waiting that is the nastier. So it was at the beach near Rio Martin. The Major had deployed and hidden the convoy and we just waited . . . and waited. Nor did the sirocco let up. The sand blew and blew and we were glad indeed of the glass visors and nose and mouth pads the Major had provided for us. Even with these, breathing was difficult, life was hell and so we waited. And then, suddenly, unheard because of the wind, a large limousine, which I recognised as being similar to the one that had taken me for my first Moroccan 'ride', and later taken me into voluntary captivity to 'stand in' for Clare, approached at speed, swung off the main road and made its way down the narrow, tortuous roadway to the beach.

Ginger gripped my arm excitedly.

"Bandits twelve o'clock!" he yelled in my ear to be heard above the wind's roar and the sea's howl.

"Roger!" I found my heart beating wildly and the old adrenalin pumped around my frame excitedly. This was what I craved. This was the life! It worked for me like hooch for some or, sad to say, hashish for others. Unseen, silent, alert we waited until the car stopped at the edge of the beach and the driver turned the car so that it faced the high road in case of a quick departure. Then out stepped two characters in European clothes, both holding Tommies. They were followed by Dragarno himself.

I found myself nudging Major Swinley.

"The Big Boy himself!" I yelled in his ear.

He nodded and raised a thumb to indicate that we were in luck. The thugs with the tommy guns took up a stance by the car, looking back at the main road whilst Dragarno looked seawards, his coat flying wildly away from his body, torn from around him by the wind. He was wearing

a pair of goggles and he held a torch in his hand.

Suddenly, *ça boum!* from the sea there came a series of winking flashes, as if from an Aldis lamp or large torch. Still we waited. We waited until, at last, coming in crazily like a surf board, just able to right itself, rushed in by the tail wind at breakneck speed, a motor torpedo boat with an Oerlikon mounted in the bows and manned headed for the beach. There were an assorted complement of duffle coated or burnous-clothed rascallions on board. The captain of the craft, probably because he had really little control of it, headed straight for the shore and beached her. She listed heavily and the deck, at an angle of about forty degrees, was nearly an impractical proposition. The traffickers—all save the man at the Oerlikon and another clinging to the bridge—had leapt ashore and taken out long ‘wires’ to the nearest tree trunks to secure the craft, meanwhile, a man who seemed to be in charge had crossed to Dragarno and a conversation between them ensued. And still we waited. I began to wonder if perhaps Major Swinley had left our attack too late. I shifted uncasily and looked at the Major, as if awaiting some move, some guidance. Sensing my impatience at his delay he turned, he cupped his hands to my ear and shouted “Softly, softly catchee monkey.”

“You’ve got the patience of Job,” I yelled back.

“It’s the big boy I want,” he shouted back. “Out there a mile or two off shore is the parent ship. I’d like to cop that. I’d like to cop that very much.”

“So?”

“I want Dragarno to give the O.K. Once they’ve had the O.K. they won’t be so interested in the shore or the possibility of gunfire.”

“I get you! Suppose there’s no signal?” I ventured.

The Major shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ll wait a few more minutes,” he shouted.

I nodded and made a gesture of approbation. I liked this character the more I saw of him, yet I was jealous and very envious. It didn’t take an Oxford Don to know who was in Clare’s locket.

Then, only a moment or two after the Major's explanation to me which I, in turn, relayed to Ginger, the man with Dragarno nodded, turned to the M.T.B. and gave a signal to the man on the bridge. He turned out to be a bunting-tosser.

With difficulty, due to the angle of the deck, he managed to switch direction and face seawards. He raised an Aldis lamp and made a signal seawards. I watched the beam try to penetrate the curtain of spray and sand kicked up by the sirocco. Apparently it got through for, in a moment, far out to sea, an O.K. in the international code came across the ocean. And still the Major didn't move.

"Oh, come on man!" I found myself saying aloud, but no one heard.

Then, as the head man handed Dragarno a modest-sized packet, Major Swinley swiftly raised his hand and flashed a torch beam skywards.

Instantly the battle was joined. From all sides of the cove, from behind rocks and trees, from behind scrub and bush, the special section of Interpol, Tagore's own lads, made swiftly towards the beach, spraying it with a curtain of lead. The two men with the Tommies leapt instantly behind the bonnet of the limousine, but too late. The bloke at the Oerlikon hadn't a chance, thank God!—by mutual and obvious consent, he had to be eliminated first. A wild, murderous burst, wild and high, was quickly silenced. He suddenly flung both hands skywards, clutched at his head and toppled over the deck rail and into the Drink.

As I raced towards the M.T.B. I found myself thinking—'all this trouble, all this bloodshed, and soon some of us measured for our wooden overcoats, all, all—for a small brown paper parcel containing the almost priceless, deadly narcotic. . . .'

I wanted Dragarno personally and I made a bee line for him but, though he had grabbed a shoulder-holstered .35 and started firing back with his right hand while he held the precious parcel in the other, before I got within range, he suddenly jigged about like a marionette in the hands of a

drunken puppeteer and teetered around, dancing and cavorting insanely for a second or two in the weird, windy moonlight. Suddenly streams of blood started to pour out of him like water from a colander. I had only once seen this curious and terrible sight before—once when we had been shot-up at the shore-based R.N.A.S. at Ford during the war . . . it was a sight I had hoped never to see again—not even to a nasty type like Dragarno. To Garon, perhaps.

The battle was soon over. The casualties to the Interpol boys, two wounded slightly, one badly. The M.T.B. was in sound condition. Next to launch her. For the Major was still after the parent ship—if the gun flashes hadn't been observed—for, whereas no doubt the M.T.B. could catch her, it could well be the one Oerlikon might not be a match for the bigger craft's armament. For my part I wanted Garon—I wanted him badly. But where was the bastard? He certainly couldn't be on the ship. I turned back to the dying Dragarno. His driver held him in his arms and was openly weeping. I knelt down beside them.

"Goodbye, Dragarno," I said. The life blood was ebbing from him fast. He looked at me with unemotional eyes then, for a brief moment came recognition.

He mouthed my name. I dropped my head to his lips so that I could hear him.

"Garon—where's Garon?" I shouted at him.

He made a final exertion. I craned forward once more to his lips, but he did not tell me where his lieutenant was. Instead, he said: "You never did find out my nationality." He laughed weakly, then, in a sudden contraction of final pain, he died. His weeping driver looked at me and shouted above the wild wind: "Why you do this thing? Who tell you where we are?"

This I thought was my last chance. He had played into my hands. He just might know. I yelled back.

"Paul Garon. He told the police about tonight."

The man looked at me, not in amazement, as I had half suspected he might, but in complete credulity . . . when

thieves fall out! He shouted back: "Garon tell police. Double-cross Mister Dragarno?"

"Yes," I lied, "where's Garon now?"

"At headquarters, I think." The man yelled back.

"Where?" I asked.

"Tangier."

"Tangier? Not Tétuan?"

"No. Tangier . . . *Juany* restaurant, here. . . ."

But I didn't wait for more. I didn't even wait for Ginger. Nor did I want to tell Mr. Tagore. I hared for Ming II.

I leapt into the concealed Aston, kicked and tugged away the branches camouflaging her and jumped in. I let in the clutch at about 4,000 r.p.m.—madness on that road, the back of the Aston went into a gay fandango, which I corrected as the wheels gripped the dusty road. I changed into second as the revs reached 6,000 and was on the main road and zooming up to third before you could say David Brown. Tétuan seemed only seconds away. I shot through the deserted town and was out on the main road for Tangier in a moment or two. Now, save for the stray traveller in the middle of the road, I could give Ming a chance to do her stuff, but I knew that this was dicey because although the headlights were powerful, and I could pick up 'bods' a long way off, at the speed I was going this really wasn't much help. I had to rely on my wrist work with the steering. I went up that Tétuan-Tangier road lickety-split without incident, musing at the irony and audaciousness of the Dragarno-Garon mob having the effrontery to put their headquarters in the last place one would suspect—Tangier, and at a sleazy night club at that, one had to admire the sauce of those thugs.

In case we were separated or in trouble during the raid, Major Swinley had issued us with some sort of Interpol card so that I whistled through the Custom posts at the edge of Tangier without any undue delay or trouble, and I was soon going up towards the Boulevard Pasteur. I parked Ming II in a narrow side street and hurried on foot to the *Juany*. I wondered if there had been any way of Garon knowing about the landing, or if the ship was in radio contact with the shore

and, if so, had they realised what had happened on the beach? Furthermore, once the M.T.B. went back to them, would the boarding party make it successfully? These were questions I could not answer as I hurried into the foyer of the *Juany*. These were questions that were soon answered for me. The manager, pallid through late hours, troubled with circumferential difficulty through too much starch, looked startled at my aggressive manner. I pushed him into a convenient chair.

"O.K. Mister, Paul Garon's offices?" I demanded belligerently.

He looked even more startled when I poked him in the ribs with the Luger I had. There seemed to him no point in stalling.

"Upstairs," he said.

"Ta ever so!" I said and, revolver in hand, started up the stairs three at a time. I paused at the top. I would need all the breath I could muster. I waited a few seconds, doing some elementary but most useful and utterly satisfactory Yoga breathing exercises, and then tiptoed quietly along the corridor, wondering which of the rooms would contain Garon. Then, as I approached the last room along the corridor, I heard the crackle and varying sound of a short-wave. On it someone was speaking in Portuguese. I was momentarily disappointed because this meant that if the smugglers' parent ship had not been boarded by the time I had taken to get from Tétuan to Tangier, then not only had it escaped the net but the chances were that anyone who had gone out to her in the M.T.B. was now probably very dead at the bottom of the jolly old Med. But this was not the time for moping. I paused once more, corrected my breathing and opened the door very, very softly.

Garon was there, crouched over a little radio set, listening intently. I stood there for a moment and looked at this sitting target, this dead duck, this gone guy, this boyo with the skids under him and I said, very softly :

"Hallo, Garon ! Remember me?"

With a startled oath he leapt to his feet and reached for

his gun in a shoulder holster. I didn't want to shoot him, I wanted to give him a bloody good hiding. I therefore leapt forward as he reached for the revolver, and as his hand started to pull at the gun, I kicked his arm very swiftly and very hard. He emitted a yelp of pain and the gun clattered to the floor. I promptly jabbed my own gun in his ribs. He stood resolutely still and waited for me to squeeze the trigger. I was surprised, for I had expected him to whine.

"Oh no, Garon. You aren't going quite so easily!" I told him. "First of all, I'm going to beat hell out of you, it's the only thing you understand—violence and pain. You've inflicted it on others—dished it out. You've never had to take it. I bet you were the champion bully at Latymer, eh?"

He gulped, then sneered. "I got by, Trenton!" he averred. His courage which he had scraped together for the moment of departure, now returned in plenty, when he discovered that he had a sporting chance.

"What do you plan to do, beat me to death with your revolver butt?" he asked with biting sarcasm.

In reply, still covering him, I kicked his revolver away a few paces then picked it up, so that I had one in each hand. I was sorely tempted to let him have the lot. He grew very frightened again and swallowed hard.

"I know what you're thinking, Trenton," he said. "Not very British of you, is it? And what was all that about a sporting chance?"

"I didn't say a thing about a sporting chance," I retorted. "I wouldn't use the word 'sport' in conversation with you at all. To me you are just scum. I hope your vocabulary knows the word, Paul Garon, José Anchura, that is, Scum!" The way I spat it out it certainly sounded revolting. He didn't reply. He wondered what my next move was. I was then conscious that the wind had stopped. The sirocco was over. I crossed to the window and opened it and I threw out the two revolvers.

"All right, you bastard!" I yelled. "Come on!"

Then swiftly, exultantly, Garon made a dive for his desk. I realised just in time. I leapt for it, too. I had to move fast.

Idiotic me ! I knew then that he had another revolver in the drawer. I made a flying jump for the drawer and to hell with the Queensberry rules, I leapt at that drawer and kicked out. I kicked the drawer to, just as he had reached into it for the gun. He screamed in pain as the drawer slammed onto his wrists. His face, contorted with pain and fury, was very close to mine. Then he did, oddly enough, just as his sister had done, he spat He spat in my face. It was just the necessary fire I needed. We set to and I dam' near killed him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

It was Francis Bacon, I think, who said, 'Revenge is a wild kind of Justice.' When the battle was over I sat gasping for breath in Paul Garon's chair with my feet on Paul Garon's chest. He lay on the floor—out for the count and then some more counting. In battering him senseless I had, in return, one eye closed, a broken nose, a swollen jaw and a few nasty kicks in the groin that made any movement from the waist down a sheer hell. We must have made quite a racket, but it wasn't until the fight was over that the manager of the *Juany* peered through a panel we had smashed in the battle, to gawp at the damage and Garon on the deck, and then hurried off for the gendarmerie. I suppose I looked quite a mess, there was blood streaming down my face from a cut on the forehead, my nose had shot a crimson cascade down my shirt, which was in ribbons, and my eyelid was fast becoming discoloured; but I had enjoyed giving that sadistic so-and-so a bashing.

Sometime later, after I had spent quite a few hours in the local Bastille, whilst Garon, after hospital treatment, was taken off for questioning, I finally received a clearance from the Tagore group and was called for by the cheerful rugger-playing sergeant who, en route to H.Q., filled in the details that I had missed after I had headed for Tangier and Mr. Paul Garon né José Anchura.

It appeared that the parent ship had seen some of the gun flashes despite the fierce sirocco and had instantly made off, pursued by the M.T.B., now operated by the Tagore boys. Just as the M.T.B., shipping far too much water, was gaining on the bigger vessel, the narcotic boys were able to get a hit with tracer, and though it did only a small damage to the superstructure, above the waterline, the rough seas caused the M.T.B. to founder. They turned back reluctantly, even then they did not make shore, and as the thugs' vessel steamed

away, the M.T.B. sank, and one of the Interpol boys was drowned trying to make the shore. Ginger, I also heard, did stalwart work with the Major, getting another of them back to the beach, exhausted but safe.

It was, of course, the parent ship which I had heard on short-wave to Paul Garon. They had risked breaking radio silence, and the chance of being pin-pointed by so doing, in order to warn Garon. They had left the warning too late, for at that moment I had entered Garon's room prior to our big beat-up. Indeed, it was to be their undoing. The corvette from Gib. which was trying to locate them was handed their position on a plate. After a short exchange of fire, the pirates soon ran up a surrender flag and a R.N. boarding party took over. Apart from the death of Dragarno, the local big boy who was in this giant and wicked concern, only a cog in the vast organisation, the North African section was certainly wiped out, and I believe the Moroccan government sent Mr. Tagore and his merry men a particularly flattering citation: -

For my part, after a glass of *Chaudsoleil* in Mr. Tagore's office, I went off to visit Fern who had been taken to a private nursing home, from there I went to see the American attaché and finally, with my nose in a rubber splint, one eyebrow shaved off (and several stitches over the eye), I met Clare Cuffley-Evans for lunch in the smart and delightful roof-top restaurant overlooking the harbour at the modern *Velasquez*. It was a heavenly day. The sirocco had vanished, leaving only a bright sun whose rays danced and sparkled on the green-blue waters. Clare, in a crisp, white two-piece, which had me mocking the whitest of white T.V. Commercials, looked cool, elegant and utterly desirable. We ate roast chicken stuffed with olives, then over our coffee. I eyed that locket on her wrist with a rueful expression of, I hoped, mixed cynicism and mock disappointment. Clare soon de-bunked me.

"You can remove that petulant school-boy expression from your face, Garway Trenton, and stop staring at my locket."

"I'm still interested in what's inside it," I replied.

"You have been, ever since we met," Clare averred.

"I admit it."

Clare looked at me for a few seconds, debating whether or not she should grant me my unspoken request.

"You are going to be surprised," she said.

"I'm not, you know."

"You are, you know." She held out her arm and I took the locket in my hands and turned it over, then quickly released a small catch on the side. I opened the locket. In it was a small photo of her husband, Peter. I glanced up quickly at Clare and we looked at one another and we looked and we looked . . . finally I said: "Surprise! Surprise!"

"And who, pray, did you expect to find there?" she challenged. We looked at one another again and we looked and looked. The silence, pregnant with unsaid, provocative thoughts, was broken by the derisive hoot of an incoming ship's siren from the port below us.

"Ho hum!" I said.

"Meaning?"

"Nothing, just ho hum." I raised my brandy glass and said, "to a hell of a woman!"

"I thank you, sir!" Clare said playfully, eyes shining almost mischievously, though, in truth, normally, she was not the eyes-shining, mischief-type.

"I suppose you are going to tell me your husband needs you?" I thrust at her.

"If ever, certainly now," Clare replied. I wanted to take up that 'if ever'. I wanted to ask about Major Swinley, I wanted . . . Heck! I wanted too dam' much.

"What will happen to him? Will he be bowler-hatted?" I asked her.

Clare shrugged her shoulders. "Severely reprimanded, loss of rank, sent somewhere else—this at best."

I nodded. "He's young," I added, I hoped sympathetically.

"See you on St. Helena!" Clare said wryly.

"Then you do plan that we meet again?"

"Why ever not?"

"At the risk of being trite, it would be safer for me, not to."

"Don't be trite, Gar'," she implored. For a second she fooled me.

"You're laughing up *my* sleeve!" I retorted.

"See you somewhere, sometime!" she said.

For the first few days at home it was strange to wake up to the usual London sounds—the morning buses and the gay matutinal song of the birds, the clink of milk bottles, the postman's rat-tat-rat-tat . . . in many ways, satisfying. 'When a man is tired of London. . . .' There was some comfort, too, in the sound of Mrs. Lily Mertens, my 'daily's' key in the front door lock, her inevitable sniff, winter *and* summer, as if she suffered from a permanent cold, the thump as she dumped her shopping bag (seemingly full of lead, no matter what time of day or night). Then the faint snatches of song of an erotic nature which finally blossomed into full strength as the breakfast tray was readied and Mrs. Mertens mounted the stairs.

"Morning, Lily!"

"Mornin' Mr. T, sir!"

"What is it today, Mrs. Mertens?"

"Well, you guess, sir."

"Kippers I fancy!" Not too difficult to guess, since the somewhat overpowering odour of these delightful pisces had lost no time in invading my entire premises.

"Quite right, but," teased Lily Mertens, "what's for 'afters'?"

One of my eccentricities is that I enjoyed the first course of many meals *last*, so that such things as melon, grapefruit and so on, were the final sustaining things.

"Not, I pray you, *Snuggies*," I said, mock-pontifically, "I couldn't bear *Snuggies*, Lily."

"Go on with you," said the resolute Mrs. Mertens, "they'll do you good after all that foreign muck. They're full of body-buildin' nourishment," Mrs. Mertens said, pulling back the curtains, having had it dinned into her night after night on T.V.

"Now, now, Mrs. Mertens," I said, pulling her leg, "there's no need to be coarse!"

Mrs. Mertens chuckled throatily. "You eat fat men," she said.

I gave a long, pretended sigh. Mrs. Mertens sat at the morning papers on the bed and the mail.

"See you later, alligator," she said, and she skipped off downstairs with the latest Rodgers and Hammerstein tune on her well-made-up lips.

I sipped the tea, she had made it well and very strong indeed, then I had a mouthful of kipper. It was delicious—a change from very chicory coffee, *cous-cous*, and croissants. I yawned and looked out of the window. The sky was promising, my one laburnum tree grinned back at me. . . . I remember, I remember. . . .

I looked at the envelope of the morning mail. There was one from Fern La Verne. She was in a Swiss sanatorium and doing nicely. Chances were that she'd be able to pull out of the habit into which those sinister so-and-so's had indoctrinated her. I made a mental note to fly over to Geneva at the weekend to see her. That would mean cancelling my game of squash with Ginger but he would understand. Meanwhile, today was fraught with pleasantries . . . the cool of Burlington Arcade; the trees in Green Park; polo at Roehampton; the bustle and atmosphere of King Street, Chelsea; lunch with Charity Stockton at the Vendôme, the nearest 'haunt' I knew to the famous Fontenham's in Bond Street where, you may remember, former 'deb' Charity worked.

Yes, a pleasant day ahead. Not madly exciting, prosaic, inclined to be dull, perhaps.

As I lay there musing 'the telephone sang out with mysterious promise. . . .'